

LONG GONE DEAD



By **MARK SLADE**

LONG GONE DEAD

THE ODARKO SERIES
BOOK 2

MARK SLADE

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PRAISE FOR LONG GONE DEAD

"Mark Slade's *Long Gone Dead* is a fun and quirky action-packed yarn unlike anything ever seen before."

----Andy Rausch, author of *American Trash* and *Layla's Score*

"In the decade I've known Mark Slade and read his fiction, I've watched his evolution as a writer. With *Long Gone Dead*, he demonstrates he is one of the finest scribes in any genre. The characters, the dialogue, the story arc, the settings combine to make not just a page-turner, but a must-read for all."

-----G. Wayne Miller, Author of *Traces of Mary*.

"In his novel *Long Gone Dead*, author Mark Slade channels Sam Spade, the *Twilight Zone*, and seventies Acid-Noir hard-boiled detective fiction. But before you enter Slade's dangerous world of P.I. Richard Cole, Prepare yourself for some punch-in-the-face weirdness! Or as Rod Serling used to say at the beginning of the aforementioned *Twilight Zone*: 'Submitted for your approval'."

-----Jack Dann, Author of *The Man Who Melted*.

For Tracey, the smartest person I've ever known.

"The occult is a category of supernatural beliefs and practices, encompassing such phenomena as those involving mysticism, spirituality, and magic in terms of any otherworldly agency. It can also refer to other non-religious supernatural ideas like extra-sensory perception and parapsychology."

PART 1

FROM THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OCCULT
ARTIFACTS
BY RUSSEL DE'BLANC

(Copyright 1969)

THE OBJECT

Color: Black

5 x 5 x 12 inches

Weight: 7 ounces.

Made of Unknown material—sometimes described as made of granite, other times silk or unknown fabric.

THE OBJECT, often referred to as the Obelisk, was discovered in 1935 by Charles Shandt in Egypt during an exploration of the Tomb of Orasis, one of many of spellbinding Doctors that served King Tutankhamun, a pharaoh that ruled 1332-1323 BC. Discovering the purpose of the Obelisk became Shandt's lifelong obsession. In his research that took him all over the world, several of these statues would pop up in the strangest areas: Nigeria, Paris, Atlanta, Georgia, Ukraine, and Thailand.

THE RINGING of the telephone ripped through the silence of the bedroom and tore me from my dream. A constant droning ping bounced off the walls until I found the phone in the darkness. A hand lazily slapped the receiver off the cradle and the contraption slammed on the floor once, bounced up in a half shadow on the bedroom wall, dangled in the air. I switched on the lamp that rested on the end table beside my bed. I saw the phone was hopping. The cord kept the receiver from completely touching the carpeted floor. A voice squawked on the line, and only broke my sleepy gaze seconds later with drawn-out *hellos*.

I didn't bother sitting up. I turned on my side and snatched the phone on its sixth hop.

"Hello," I said groggily.

A strange chirping sound came over the droning telephone line. Then a voice popped on so loud, I dropped the phone, wincing at the discomfort the voice had on my still sleeping ears.

"Dick Cole!" the voice screeched.

"Dick Cole!" the voice repeated.

Although muffled, I could tell the grizzly voice belonged to a man that was possibly middle-aged, smoked too much, drank a lot of

whiskey, and more than likely white. I retrieved the receiver, slowly pressed my ear to one end, and my mouth to the other.

"Richard Cole!"

"Sometimes," I said.

"What?!" the voice screamed.

I jerked away. Waited a few seconds and placed my ear back to the receiver.

"What?"

"What?" the voice asked.

"What are we talking about?"

"Are you Richard Cole?!"

"I am," I said. "Why don't you form your questions in complete sentences so I can understand what you're talking about?"

The voice waited to speak again.

"They did it," the man said after a moment.

"That's wonderful," I sat on the side of the bed, ran a hand across his balding head. "I appreciate the update. Good night."

"Wait, wait," the voice begged. "I'm trying to tell you something."

"Okay, make it quick. If I don't get my eight hours my face gets wrinkled and the beauty cream clogs my arteries."

"Please," the voice went from confidently gruff to dismal whine. "Don't make light of these things. This is this is so horrible."

"Look, you didn't even say who you are and who is doing these horrible things."

The man on the other end choked up, cleared his throat.

"I can't go into too many details. They're after me right on top of me I'm sorry. I just just need to ask you to help me. Stop these people from doing anything else—"

White noise took over, and if the man said anything that made sense, I didn't hear the rest of what was said. The static cleared up and

the man's voice faded back in.

"I am you—"

White noise faded in again and his voice was muffled momentarily. With a dominant screech his words were crystal clear.

"—Do you understand?"

I cleared my voice, blinked incessantly.

"I think so," he said. "Look. I can't help you if you don't tell me who you are, what you need me to do, and who these people are."

In a huff, the man said, "I just told you everything!"

"Hey, buddy, there was a lot of damn static on the line and I didn't understand—"

Click.

The line went dead. Static took over completely.

I started to hang up, held on to the receiver a little longer. Maybe I should dismiss the call as somebody screwing with me. To be honest, I didn't know anyone who could play a practical joke except my friend Ajax, and even he had little tolerance for such foolishness. So I put that out of my head.

Suddenly, I had a better idea. He stabbed the button on the cradle twice, listened for the static to give way to a few clicks. A woman's voice came on. The velvet smooth voice of the operator I always fantasized about.

It wasn't my initial intention to get a buzz on hearing her voice. I actually didn't know she was going to be the operator this time of night. But I was over the moon having heard her say:

"Yes."

I sighed.

"Uh, yeah, operator. I just had a call—"

"Oh God," she said, annoyed as hell. "It's YOU. Look, buddy, really, I am flattered. I also have to tell you, I'm SICK of you weirdos calling

and breathing hard when you you God do what you do! I have to tell you, you're kind are driving me up the wall calling me all the time!"

"Hold on I don't do that—"

"Yes, YOU do!"

"I don't—I do like your voice—"

"Here we go again! Look," the operator said confidentially. "My boss is here tonight. I know I usually do well listen I can't right now! Well listen to you tonight because my husband might pop in to check on me —"

"You have the wrong impression," I said. Even though I was tempted by what she was eluding to, I had never done that, nor thought of it, and more than likely wouldn't do that. "For real, I need to know where the last call to me came from."

Silence on the other end.

"You don't call me regularly?"

"Uhhh well I do but I don't do what you were referencing to—"

"Oh God. I'm sorry," the operator said. "I'll check for you."

I waited. During the interval, I started to think about the operator. I wondered if she was a redhead or a blonde. I remember how she made me think of a school teacher I had in Baltimore. How the school teacher was so commanding, ordering everyone about. How she dressed—

The operator popped back on. "The call came from a payphone at Lowden."

"Lowden? There's a payphone at the rest stop?"

"Yes," she said coolly. "They installed one six months ago."

"Okay. Thank you."

"My pleasure."

"Mine, too. Hearing your voice."

The operator was none too happy to hear that.

"Oh, damn! You creep!"

The line went dead. I laughed, held on to the receiver a minute longer. Finally, I placed it on the cradle and wished I hadn't said that.

I got out of bed and for some unknown reason I went to the window and peeked out the blinds. All I saw was the reds and blues reflected in a puddle from a streetlight. The rain washed the earth in an angry tirade earlier that night. I pulled my hand away from the blinds quickly. I felt wetness on my pajama top. I looked down and noticed it was soaked completely. I searched my bed and it was dry. The roof wasn't leaking either.

Why the hell was I wet and everything around me was dry?

RELIANT MOVED into a new office building shaped like a triangle that stood three stories high. It loomed tall over the rest of Odarko. Reliant was my employer ever since I moved out here from Baltimore. I sold my P.I. business and followed a young woman who came to these parts to become a psychiatrist. I started working for Reliant when the owner, Old Man Spiff ran Odarko at one time. An oil tycoon who liked to control everything, he pretty much ceased to live in the real world and lived in his mind. From what I heard, the old man just sat in his huge mansion staring out the window, wondering when his dead daughter was coming home. Finally, after years and years of causing others pain and misery, Oliver Spiff felt overwhelming grief for his actions, and he lost his mind.

Spiff's daughter died in a car accident nineteen years ago. She was riding around with a psychotic young man who liked to commit thrill kills. It was Karma, God, the Devil, or whatever it is that controls the universe, that caught up to Spiff, his daughter, and her boyfriend.

Reliant was a conglomerate composed of five companies. Spiff was president, but with his failing health and mental capacity, Davis Goode quietly phased Spiff out. Leo Sharp was another lawyer that ran Reliant and tended to the five companies' affairs. Even though he was Goode's

secretary, he exuded a lot of influence over Goode and the board. Spiff's company's main interest was oil. The other four included railroad baron Alan Holdsworth, communication tycoon Fredric Thomas, clothing manufacturer Dieter French, and Dan Sternum, owner of Great Lakes Meat Packing Company. Each of these men and the board employed me, a P.I. who is actually a problem solver. The old term was Yardbird. A Yardbird takes care of problems, legal and illegal.

Scratch Williams was a Yardbird. That was the man I succeeded. He disappeared in nineteen sixty-eight. No one knows what happened to him. They found his car out on 17, on the edge of Odarko, the door on the driver's side wide open, radio blaring "Bring it on Home" by Sam Cooke.

Just disappeared into thin air.

I walked through the revolving doors behind a man in a grey overcoat and a woman in a pink dress. They were bickering, complaining about seeing a lawyer, Sammy Beck. The conversation quickly turned to how much they hated each other and how wonderful it will be to be out of each other's lives. They led me to the elevator, never once looking at me, not noticing I existed.

They argued over her dress. It was too short in the man's opinion. The woman countered that he had no problem with the hems of her dresses two years prior; as a matter of fact, the shorter the better for his hands to steal under her skirts. They argued that she was loose, but did not want children and he had to pay for a "special doctor" in California to take care of the problems. They argued over respective in-laws. Over money. They argued about his drinking. They argued about what floor Beck was on.

"He is on the second floor!" the woman exclaimed, tossing her blonde oval-shaped head. "You never listen to me."

"I'm the one who spoke with him on the phone, Cindy. He said he was on the second floor," the man said in a squeaky Boston accent.

"Well, I'm the one who met with him for lunch, Jerry!"

"Don't say my name as if you are disgusted, damn it! You know I can't stand it!"

"Excuse me, folks," I spoke up. "Sammy Beck is on the third floor." I reached across both of them and pressed the button. "That's where I'm headed as a matter of fact."

They looked at me as if I just appeared out of thin air.

The man cleared his throat, adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses. The woman looked straight ahead. Both of them were embarrassed. I was amused. To further screw with them, I took out a card saying I was a Private Investigator.

"I think Mr. Beck has mentioned both of you at different times. Or " I let the words trail off. Thought about what I was going to say. "Could be the last lawyer you hired " I looked at the woman.

The man swallowed hard. The woman gasped.

"You see," I said, "I do some work for Beck from time to time. You two look familiar."

The man turned to his wife, wide-eyed. He turned back to me, tried to place me. When nothing registered, he looked frightened. The woman gasped, clutched her purse to her bosom, her right index finger nervously scraping the ridges of the purse. Her fear was this strange man who spoke to them had a nefarious plan for her. She wasn't concerned for her husband at all.

The elevator came to a halt. The door swung open. I pushed past them. I turned and pointed a lazy finger, and pretended to be caught in a thought.

"Wait your " he paused, then laughed. He shook his head. "No. Sorry. I got you two mixed up with another couple." I saluted both of

them, stepped out of the elevator. "Good day."

I ambled through a sea of people coming and going from different offices. The first office was a comic book publisher called Whizz Comics. The second office was a boxing promoter, Tony Joe White Ltd. The third was Homestead, a realtor. Those were the offices on the right. On the left were two offices belonging to Reliant, but no one knew exactly what the people did. The last office was Leo's. Carole Dunn was his long-time secretary, had her desk in the middle of the chaos of people talking, walking through that hallway. She and I had some nights together whenever her boyfriend was out of town. Lately, that had stopped for two reasons. Mike decided he didn't want to continue the learning experience at Oklahoma State because his mother was sick. The other reason was I started a relationship with Alice Finley, an artist with Whizz Comics.

I met Alice for the first time at Shep's house. Shep was having a birthday party for his granddaughter and Alice used to babysit the little girl from time to time. We started talking about Shep's ability to use a grill. We lost touch for a bit. A few months passed, and I saw her in the hospital I was in. I had developed a drinking problem. Leo was the one who convinced me to get help. Alice was in there for exhaustion.

When we got out, we started seeing each other. I didn't rush things. Pretty quickly, I couldn't stay away from this enchanting, intelligent, witty, very talented woman. It took me a few weeks before I started spending the night.

Carole was not happy with me.

"Good morning, Carole," I said.

Carole didn't look up. She kept opening the mail and sorting it in three different piles.

"Carole," I said. "Hello."

Carole sniffed, kept opening the mail and sorting it delicately. She touched her oval-shaped blonde head. Her hair never moved. Not even when we were made love or played Frisbee or volleyball. Even skinny dipping in the quarry. Water just flattened her hair, molded it around her face. The hairspray was so thick a bullet couldn't pierce that shell.

"Okay. I get it," I sighed. "You're angry with me."

She raised her head slowly, those green eyes burned bright red. "Ohh," Carole said so sweetly. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't see you standing there." Her demeanor changed quickly, as did her smile to a snarl. "How can I help you?"

I wish you would die, Carole mouthed.

I was caught off guard by that. What the hell did I do? We naturally moved on. She still had Mike. Was I supposed to keep sneaking around with her when her boyfriend had basically given up an education to care for his mother?

I shrugged it off. I had more important things, like getting paid by Reliant.

"I have a meeting with Leo," I smiled, resting an elbow on her desk.

She glared at me coldly. "And your name is, sir?"

I was stunned. Hurt. "C-Carole—" I stammered. That was something I always struggled with since I was eight. When I got upset, or nervous, I stammered.

"Your name, SIR!" She emphasized the sir to let me know she no longer thought of me as a friend but just a stranger with business at hand.

Eat shit and die, she mouthed.

Fuming, I slammed my fist hard on her desk. She jumped slightly, snorted and fixed her cold composure.

What the hell is your problem, I mouthed back.

"Rich-Rich-Richard! Richard Cole," I said with a growl figured in the forming the words.

"Hmmmmm let me see " Carole flipped through her appointment book, slowly turning the pages. "So far I don't see your name, Mr. Cole —"

"Carole!" a high-pitched, gravelly voice called out from the hallway. It was Leo Sharp. He was a short man whose suits never seemed to fit him. His glasses were too big for his small face, as were his lips and flounder-like eyes. "Stop screwing around with Dick!"

She looked indignant. "I hate you," she whispered. We glared at each other and with a normal business voice, she said, "Mr. Sharp will see you now, Mr. Cole."

"Thank-Thank-thank-thank you." I tapped her desk and walked away, still looking at Carole.

Leo stopped and turned to watch us. "Are you coming, Dick, or do I have to hold your hand to lead you to my office?"

I shook my head. "No-no-Nope. Just wishing C-c-c-c-Carole-Carole a good day."

I bit my lower lip hard. That was a way for me to control my stammer. Pain. Bite my lip, pinch my wrist. Whatever it took to get back to normal. Counting from ten never worked for me. Pain was the deal. As a teenager I would sometimes prick myself with a sewing needle I stole from my mother's sewing basket.

Leo grumbled something under his breath. Then he said, "Get a move on it, man."

"Yep," I peddled forward at double speed to catch up.

I followed Leo down the hallway. Leo went inside his office and I hung around the threshold. I turned to Carole and mouthed to her: *Can we talk later?*

No, I hate you, she mouthed.

I was shocked. I held up my hands to ask why. Carole snarled, steadied her eyes on me, sending daggers my way.

"Are you coming inside?" Leo screamed. "I am very short on patience, mister!"

Leo motioned for me to enter the office first. I went past him, scanning his facial features. He looked upset. Yet that was confusing. He had a half-smile planted on his thin lips. His dark eyes were moist, still had those hard-driven dots that danced around the whites, indicating Leo was thinking. The door slammed shut. I found a mahogany chair and plopped down. Leo dragged his feet across the carpet and stood at his desk, keeping his back to me.

"You know who Bobby Clarke is?"

"A singer. I was listening to an FM rock station and they were playing him. They called him a Funk Rock singer? Not sure what that is. He had some hits," I said, took out a pack of Cheshire cigarettes. I tapped the bottom of the unopened pack with the palm of my hand.

"He's dead," Leo said.

I stopped patting the pack of cigarettes. I glared at the package, decided not to open it, placed them back in my jacket.

"When?" I asked.

"Last night," Leo said.

"Was it on the news?"

"Hasn't been released yet. We're holding back the information."

"Family know?"

"Not yet." Leo licked his lips. He sighed after a moment. "I need to personally tell Bobby's wife. I may need you to go with me."

I nodded. We fell silent again. Leo was visibly shaken. He'd developed many nervous ticks over the past few years. I assume the pressures of being a caretaker to one of the biggest corporations in the southwest can take its toll on a person. This time Leo pinched his top lip

with his thumb and index finger. He stopped when I noticed. He cleared his throat and looked away.

"What's Reliant's interest?" I asked.

"We fronted the money to his business manager to help start a record label."

"A recording artist owning his own record label?"

"Yes."

"The music business would never allow that."

Leo shrugged. "The Beatles did it. And just this year, Led Zeppelin did it."

"They're also white. With white business owners. What was he? Crazy? With black business and Italian mafia concerns involved with the music business .very risky."

"Bobby Clarke was smart," Leo said. He turned, looked solemnly at me. He moved behind his desk, sat down mechanically. He drew a heavy sigh. "The man was whip-smart. He learned to sing phrasing like you hear on his records from his father and others on Gospel highway. At a very young age. Six, seven years old. At nine he traveled with his father to black churches across the south, helping provide the family with some sort of stability. His father dropped out of the picture a few years later. So the mother took care of things. Soon, Bobby's two sisters, Rosie and Dee, joined the circuit, followed by his younger brother Lamont. They formed their own group, while Bobby sang with God's Treasure. A few years later, Bobby decided to go secular."

"I'm sure that didn't set right with a lot of folks," I said. "I've heard people talk about that. As a matter of fact," I scoffed. "I was given the task by you fellas to watch a guy light his neighbor's barns on fire. Waiting for the man to make his move, I was stuck in my car listening to a preacher spew for an hour and half on the car radio about how evil Bobby Clarke is—was."

The relevance of Bobby Clarke's death hit Leo again. This time harder than a few minutes ago. He was fighting his emotions. He came back around after a while.

Leo said: "Bobby saw the potential. Like I said he was whip-smart. After recording a few hit singles, Bobby learned how to run the studio, play with the tape machines. Soon, he was producing not just his own records, but his friends as well. A few years ago, Bobby helped start the Funk movement. He also incorporated issues relevant today. He was very talented."

"Okay, Leo. You set him up as a whiz. Smart guy. What happened? Why is he dead?"

I found an old pack of Cheshire's in my pants pocket, removed a slightly smashed cigarette, and placed it in my mouth.

"Richard" he began, cleared his throat. "Dick, this matter is really jigsawed. From all reports we're not even sure what transpired."

"Go ahead, Leo. Enlighten me." I lit my cigarette, inhaled, then exhaled.

"Bobby Clarke was killed by .22 slug to his heart." Leo leaned back in his chair, put his feet on the desk. "Apparently, Bobby had been catting. He went to Capitol Lounge out on 19. He was meeting some local DJs to help promote his next single, 'She's Gone, and I'm Back'. A young lady caught his eye. She left with him. They ended up at the Tahiti Motel."

"Bobby's married, right?"

"Was," Leo said.

I nodded. "Was," I repeated. I took another drag and let out the smoke slowly. Leo looked away. Leo didn't like smoking, but he permitted it only because he was too much of a sissy to say it outright. So he passive-aggressively objected by making faces or holding his nose or offering an ashtray in the utmost asshole-ish way.

"I keep forgetting he's dead," I said.

Leo raised an eyebrow, sighed. "I do too."

"You knew him well?"

"Yes and no, Dick. I had business dealings with him, had been very friendly with his family. The man himself he didn't let people in. But I liked the man very much. I was very impressed with him. The last meeting, where I handed him 20,000 dollars, we spoke in detail about starting a music publishing company and a record label. I'm not sure that would have sat well with his manager. I wish I hadn't .well "

He stood, offered me the snake-headed ashtray that sat on the left corner of his desk. He slid it across the oak top, scraping tiny pieces behind the unpainted pottery. I smiled and took it from him, rested it on my lap.

"You feel guilty," I said.

"I definitely do." Leo bent over slightly, placed a hand on his forehead, closed his eyes. He reopened them, noticed I was watching. He removed his hand and straightened up. "I handed him that money only twelve hours ago. If I had not given that money to Bobby Clarke, he would, perhaps, still be alive."

"What happened at the Tahiti?"

"Brenda Lee Hayes is what happened." Leo bit his lower lip. "She shot him. Claiming a drunken black man broke into her office while she was on the phone with the owner of the motel. Brenda is the night manager. She says Bobby was dressed in just his sports coat, no shirt, no pants .no underwear. He was belligerent, shouting: 'Where is she! That bitch robbed me!' He came toward her; she shot him in the chest with a .22 caliber pistol. He exclaimed: 'Lady, you shot me!' He fell to the floor and died."

"Here well, mostly in Baltimore as a P.I. and a runner for the Alzotti brothers when I was younger I've been around a lot of people who were

shot or have died violent deaths," I said. "No one has ever said, 'You shot me'."

"I thought you'd say that," Leo said. "I need you to look into this."

"The Tahiti. That's in Rockford County?"

"Yes," Leo said.

"Why didn't he have his meeting at the Primrose?"

"Technically, it was the Capitol Lounge," Leo said.

"It's in the same building," I said.

"Well yes. You say Capitol, sounds rather chic. Say Tahiti a three-dollar-a-room "

"Okay, Leo. Sure. We'll say there's a difference for your sake," I told him.

"I tried to move it to the Primrose. He said he'd ask a bank if I wanted to back out. I'm not sure why he was so adamant about meeting there. We could have met in Los Angeles where he planned to build a studio. I even suggested that."

"He moved there, didn't he?"

"Just six months out of the year."

"Wife here?"

"Yes. Irene is her name. They met in L.A. when she was sixteen. Whirlwind romance. They moved here shortly after they were married in nineteen sixty-four."

"Why here?" I stubbed out my cigarette in the snake-headed ashtray and leaned forward, sat it on Leo's desk. Angrily, he moved it with a hand and tossed the ashtray and cigarette butt into the wastebasket under his desk.

"Sheppard Records is in Oklahoma city," Leo said. "He recorded 'My Time With You' there with God's Treasure."

"That's a pop song, though."

"Not the first version."

"Leo?"

"Yes?"

"The girl?"

"What girl?"

"The girl Bobby Clarke went to the room with. I should find her. Talk to her. What did she look like?"

"If I can remember. Light-haired, brunette? Maybe? I'm sorry, Dick. I really don't remember because of the circumstances."

"Okay," I nodded. "If you remember, call me or something."

"Of course, Dick," Leo said.

"Uh-huh," I stood, looked at my wristwatch. "I guess I should get a move on. I'll drive to Rockford this afternoon. Shep wanted me to look into something for him."

"Oh? Okay, I was hoping we could lunch and discuss this more."

"Maybe tomorrow," I said. "I'll let you know."

"Fine," Leo forced a smile. "How is Shep?" Leo stood, walked around his desk to show me out. Sounded like he was genuinely concerned about Shep, in spite of bad blood to do with their previous employer who was basically a vegetable.

"He's good," I said.

Leo opened the door. "And what about old man? Has Shep seen him lately?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think Shep has seen him in a year."

"Oh. Last I saw him was a few months ago. For some reason, I thought Shep and he were close."

I shook my head. "Working relationship. Strained at best. From what I could gather. Became harder for Shep to see him after Scratch disappeared.'

"I see." Leo nodded, cleared his throat. "Well call me later if you get a chance. You can reach me at home. Natalie and I have dinner at seven. Call after that. She'll be watching *Rawhide*."

"Your wife watches westerns?" I asked.

Leo smiled. "Yes. She loves them. I don't watch television unless it's the news. I find most programming the cause of the human de-evolution. Most upsetting."

"Yeah," I chuckled. "I suppose it is. I'll be in touch."

"Oh, Dick?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful."

I thought about it, flashed a smile. "I'm always careful, Leo."

I SAW the man get out of his '56 DeSoto. He finished a cigarette, before opening the trunk of his car. He reached inside, tossed a few tools to the side and grabbed a pillow case. The man struggled to lift it at first. With a loud grunt, he threw the dirty sack over his shoulder and coughed. The small, skinny, frail man with a receding hairline, entered the all-night laundromat. He walked as if life had defeated him. He was slow and deliberate, which prevented him from reaching the door in normal time.

I watched the man unload undergarments and shirts from the sack, place them in the washing machine. He poured powder in and closed the lid. He chucked a dime in the slot and turned the oversized black tumbler to the precise setting he desired. The washing machine started with a roar and jumped up and down before settling down to a constant murmur. The man looked in the pillow case, closed it quickly, and glanced around nervously.

Before he closed the pillow case, I saw the top of the Obelisk, its long, slightly twisted black neck.

He glanced around again, searching for shadows, people hidden behind the washers and dryers.

He found a row of wooden chairs near a broom closet. Decided to sit. In his boredom, he took a copy of *Newsweek* and thumbed through it. Nothing caught the man's eye. He found a pencil, started to draw funny little people in the margins. One doodle was of a man being eaten by a hybrid dragon/tiger wearing sneakers.

A young couple ambled by the laundromat, stood by the door. The man looked up at them. He grabbed his sack from under the chair, wondered if that was who he was supposed to meet. I watched them from my car. I was in the middle of enjoying his cigarette, and zoning out with the ZZ Top's "Blue Jean Blues" fading out, and Sam Cooke fading in with "Bring it on Home". The man and I waited for the couple's next move, which in retrospect was no reason to worry. They crossed the street to the Owl, the only business besides the laundromat that was still open at midnight.

I couldn't wait any longer.

I got out of my car quickly, a black 1971 AMC Javelin. I walked across the street to the laundromat with no memory of my feet touching the street or sidewalk. I felt as if a giant wind had picked up and placed me at the doorway. I swung the door open and the man lifted his eyes from the magazine. Shocked, relieved, then realization that I was not who he was supposed to meet. Fear crossed his long face.

The man sprung to his feet. He took a step to the left, I was there. He took a step to the right, I was there. We locked eyes. Several moments passed.

I charged the man, grabbing him by his coat lapels. The man resisted, but for some reason he didn't fight back. I delivered three consecutive blows to the man's face; two struck his nose, breaking it. The man winced and moaned. I struck him three more times in the temple. The man broke into heavy sobs, tears merged with blood. He prayed, apologizing to Maryanne.

I felt nothing for the man. No empathy whatsoever.

The man was on his knees, begging incoherently. I still had him by his coat lapels. I dragged him to one of the washing machines. The man's begging was interrupted when I slammed his head into the machine. I could hear the man's scalp collapse. I wasn't satisfied. I drove the man's head into the washing machine again. That time, I heard liquid and saw flesh and bone turn to jelly.

I dropped the man on the floor, stood over him to see if he was moving. The man was dead.

I sniffed at the dank air, and the smell didn't bother me at all.

I was satisfied with what I had done. Even if I didn't understand why I had done it.

I turned and went out the door quickly. I got in the Javelin, started it and drove off, skidding into a trash can as I turned the car completely around, speeding off toward my apartment

I BANGED HEAVILY on the apartment door, repeating several times, waiting for an answer. I envisioned Alice trying to ignore them. She wouldn't be able to for long out of fear of waking her neighbors in the apartment building.

Alice's panel door was flimsy and I wished she'd complain to the office about not having a peephole.

"Who is it?" she finally asked, her voice muffled slightly. I could hear her touch the chain clasp on the top of the door.

"It's—it's-it's me," I stammered.

There was a long moment for Alice to recognize my voice. Still, when she unlocked the deadbolt, she left the chain on and cracked the door open to make sure it was me.

"Dick?"

"Yeah, o-o-o-open up, will ya?" I said in a hurried voice.

Alice opened the door and I meandered inside. I looked around, took my Raider's toboggan off, tossed it on the sofa, and just barely missed the lamp. Alice shut the door, turned to me and folded her arms.

"Dick," she yawned, "It's two a.m. What are you doing here?" She saw my bloodied knuckles and gasped. "You're hurt!"

"Th-th-th-this?" I looked at my hand. "This is nothing."

"Hold on," she walked down a short hallway and into the bathroom.

Alice came back with iodine and bandages. I noticed the blue robe had been shed and she wore her black nightie with lace at the breasts and abdomen I bought her a month ago. She motioned for me to sit on the sofa, a tiger print with small rips and tears in the seat. She sat the bandages and the bottle of iodine on top of the TV for a moment and picked up a record album. She took the black vinyl out of a plain white sleeve and placed it on the turntable, the needle on the third groove. Alice sashayed back to me with the iodine and bandages cradled the front of her satin nightgown. She dropped the items on the sofa beside me, knelt in front of me. She took my bloodied and bruised hand in hers.

"This is going to sting," Alice said. She waited for a reaction; when she didn't get one, she looked disappointed. She wanted me to act like a helpless child or be frightened so she could console me, like I had consoled her. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

I glanced at her, shook my head. I listened closely to the music, unsure if I liked it or not.

"What is this music?" I asked. "Kind of melancholy. Like it should be played at a funeral."

"Oh," she laughed. "Pink Floyd's *Meddle*."

"Unusual name?"

"Not that unusual," Alice said, pouring some of the iodine on my knuckles. I flinched. She gave me a disappointed look and pulled my hand back to her. "They're from England."

I scoffed. "You always find odd music."

"Is that bad?" Alice wrapped his hand in the bandage carefully.

"No," I smiled. "That's what I like about you. You're different."

"From what?" Alice rested her head in my lap and batted those big brown eyes at me. "Other girls?"

The roots of brown were coming back in her blonde hair. I liked her hair slightly unkempt. The brown streaks looked natural. That's what I liked best about Alice. She was always herself. No put-ons. Nothing phony at all.

"Yeah—well, not just other girls," I sighed, wrapped the brown and blonde strands around my fingers. "You're different from anyone else I've known."

"You like me because of that?"

"Very much."

"I like you, too, Richard Cole." She rose just enough to meet my lips.

They were soft, pink and slightly wider on the right corner. But that was what I liked about Alice as well. The imperfections made her more attractive.

She pulled away briefly, kissed me again, backed away from me.

"What happened to you, Dick?"

"Might be too soon to tell you," I said.

"Are you sleepwalking again?"

I breathed in, breathed out. "Yeah," I nodded. "Punched the walls a few times. Woke Mr. Booker next door. He yelled through the walls. That's what snapped me out of it."

"What did he say?"

"What the hell is wrong with you? You animal! Go to a damn psychiatrist for Pete's sake!"

The lie sounded good. Only I wasn't certain it was a lie. Maybe, I didn't kill anyone. Felt so real.

We both laughed.

"Oh!" She smacked my knees with both hands. "I have to show you my new art!"

Alice jumped to her feet, the strap on her left arm sliding off in the turn. She let her breast show. During the quick trot to the small dining

room area, she fixed her breast back in her nightie. I followed her slowly. The dining room was cluttered with two chairs, a fold-up table housing paints, inks, pencils, and numerous pages of completed and uncompleted art. Her make-shift drawing board nailed and screwed to a school desk was front and center with a rolling chair she and Scratch stole from the office of the ad agency she previously worked for.

Alice worked for Whizz Comics. Her specialty was drawing romance stories.

"They assigned you the Agitator?" I asked with a sideways grin.

"Yep," Alice said with flair, waving her hands violently. "And Diamond Dan!"

"What changed their minds?"

"Steve quit." Alice laughed. "For some Godforsaken reason, Steve Fontaine up and quit the comic book business. That just leaves me, Jack Quip and Harry Osbourne. Stan is now the publisher. He's getting a lot of publicity lately. Steve and the other boys all want me to work with them. Roy is the Editor-in-Chief now."

"Good for you, honey!"

I grabbed Alice by the waist and kissed her. She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me back.

I pulled away and looked at the pencil drawings.

"The art is tremendous," I said.

"You think so?"

"I know so. Look at the way you draw cars. Wow," I whispered. "So realistic."

"Well," Alice chuckled. "Stan still says I draw women the best in the Bullpen."

"The what-pen?"

"That's what they call the office, sweetie. In this biz it includes writers, artists and Flo, the secretary."

"Ah. Okay," I nodded. "Big office?"

"No. Everyone else pretty much works from home. Actually, it's just Stan and Roy, Jack. On Thursdays the other guys are there. Flo is off. Crowded, though. Usually something funny is going on. Stan still wants to write Samantha Silk and Diamond Dan. Oh, Jimmy, a fifteen-year-old kid is there a lot. He mostly answers the mail and checks the dialogue for typos."

"Interesting," I said.

Alice studied my face. She noticed my eyes showed I was thinking of something else while glued to the panel of a man's fist striking Diamond Dan's face.

"You liar," Alice laughed.

"What?" That broke my concentration. "What do you mean?"

"You're so silly." She patted me on his chest. The smiles vanished from both of our faces. An argument was brewing. "You pretend to be interested in my work, and when I talk about it, you're just thinking of what's next for you."

"That's not true," I said, looking away.

Alice glared at me. She didn't want to fight. "Richard, I am too tired for this. I have to be at the office by nine am. Turn some work in."

"I need to go anyway," I wouldn't look at her. She reached over and took hold of my chin, shifted my face in her direction.

"Don't go," she flashed a smile. "None of what I said is true, darling. It's not true. I'm sorry I said that. You want the couch?"

"Sure," I smiled.

Alice laughed and smacked me on the shoulder. "Don't be stupid. Get undressed and come to bed. We're just sleeping, okay?"

"I'm too tired to do anything more than heavy petting," I said.

Alice took him by the hand and led me down the short hallway. "We'll definitely do that, sweetie."

THE OWL WAS Odarko's only all-night diner.

It was located on Robinson and Yandy, right by the all-night laundromat. Both businesses were one of the first to stay open twenty-four hours. Both had their share of troubles because they sat on the border to Zachery, formally known as Darktown. In nineteen sixty, the Governor of Oklahoma granted the citizens of Darktown the right to separate from Odarko and form their own town.

Governor Thames was caught in a rock and a hard place with that political move. Some said he was not for segregation; some said he was too far right to give black people their own town. Thames' ideals caught him in a trap. He didn't stand a chance either way. That's why he resigned and left for Houston, where he promptly passed away from a heart attack two months after resigning.

Past few years, I had become a regular at the Owl. Usually I got my supper there. Meatloaf and iced tea on Mondays. Fried Chicken and a Dr. Pepper on Tuesdays. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays were usually reserved for Carole, now Alice. Saturdays and Sundays I had whatever my landlady Foist prepared. Most of the time, though, I was out on a job for Reliant and ate whatever I could get from a gas station.

A dark-haired woman in her fifties with a smock clinging to her robust figure stood at the window with the Owl above her. She looked disgusted at the sight of me. Her hands immediately fell to her hips and she tilted her head to the left.

I walked in and Bernice yelled out, "Sunny side up, fries and a cup of Joe for Dick Cole!"

A gruff Irish voice from the kitchen confirmed the order. Ta Sheridan was her cook, former husband, and ex-marine. They ran the diner together until Bernice and Shep got together after his first wife passed away from cancer.

The TV was on, a small set hanging above the counter on a rack filled with napkins and salt and pepper shakers, glass bottles of ketchup and mustard. Bright color images of women with shapely legs in different colored hosiery, dancing around a refrigerator, seduced me into watching the small screen. As soon as the song and dance was over, the theme and title card cut in, announcing the *Twilight Zone* was on the airwaves. When the theme faded out, somber music crept up and Rod Serling's voice pierced the ambient analog filtering in from the TV's mono speakers. Patrons in the diner perked up to listen and watch Serling's introduction.

A view of the outdoors, camera swings around to see Earl Holloman walking through a deserted town. Holloman enters a diner and looks as if there's evidence of everybody had just been there, but no one is around and a loud jukebox is playing. Holloman tries to scurry up anyone working in the diner; to his chagrin, no one answers.

A cough took me out of my fascination with what was on the screen. I turned and noticed an older blonde-haired woman in a pink blouse and pink skirt was eyeing me. She had her elbows on the counter, a lit cigarette between her fingers. The blue smoke twirled in the air toward the old man in a seersucker hat sitting opposite her,

gumming his toast and slurping his coffee. Suddenly I realized I was still blocking the entrance.

I ambled up to the counter and leaned in. "You didn't even give me a chance to rest my can, Bernice." I laughed wildly.

"I ain't got time for your cut-ups today, Dick Cole," Bernice announced. "In five minutes the Wooten brothers are going to pile in here. Reverend Keyes will be in here and the boys who work for Oklahoma Power Company. So stop tryin' to make passes at me and get to your table. The Sheriff is waitin' on you."

"Bernice you been married to Shep Howard for six years," I said. "And you still call him 'the Sheriff'?"

"You ain't around to hear me call him worse things," Bernice looked up, saw eight unkempt young men stumbling toward the diner. "Lord a-mighty. Here they come. All night drinkin' and gamblin'. Some mornings I can barely breathe, smellin' those jokers!"

"Have a little mercy, Bernice," I said. "Being a cowboy is hard on a man's psyche."

"Mercy they can get on Sunday mornings when they hear Reverend Keyes talk about all the sins they commit in one day."

"Throwing stones, Bernice," I chuckled.

"Keep yappin' and I'll throw you out of here!" Bernice screeched.

I sighed deeply. "I can see why Shep likes you so much. You act tough, but I bet you purr like a kitten when he kisses you."

Bernice raised an eyebrow at me, flashing a mischievous smile. "Oh, get to your table!" She smacked me on the arm.

I went over to a table in the back corner where Shep and his longtime deputy Ralph Farley sat, nursing cups of coffee and picking at a plate of left over bacon and fries.

The door swung open and the little bells chimed. Eight boots hobbled across the linoleum floor. Voices shouted hellos and demands for black

coffee, sausage, bacon, and various ways to cook eggs.

"Boys," I said and saluted them.

Lane smiled and waved. Freddy and Goldie just grunted. The others didn't speak at all.

Bernice brought a plate and coffee cup to me. I was ready to dig in when she said: "I need you to pay your tab, honey."

I looked at her incredulously. "I thought Reliant picked up my bill."

"If that is true, Lovie, they have misled you," Bernice drew in deeply.

"I got it, Bernice," Shep spoke up. "Let the man have his breakfast. We got work to do."

"You got work to do." She curled her top lip. "You got work to do," she repeated. "You always got work to do. I think you got a honey pot stashed away, Sheriff."

"Why would I go to all the trouble of trappin' you and makin' you sweat at night if I got another stashed away? Why ain't I making her sweat?"

Bernice moved to Shep. She bent down and placed her face two inches from his. She whispered: "You ain't made me sweat in years, Sheriff. I pity the woman who thinks you can make her sweat."

Bernice sashayed away, turned and gave Shep the evil eye. He chuckled to himself.

"Got marital problems, Shep?" I was ravenous and ate sloppily, dropped my egg and ketchup on the front of my checkered button-up shirt. I slurped his coffee, the hot liquid stinging my throat and warming my belly. Just in three bites, I had almost devoured my eggs and most of the fries. I scraped the plate with harsh stabs; the clanging of the utensil gave a weird backbeat to the sing-song of overlapping voices and laughter from the rest of the diner.

"They talk to each other like that all the time," Ralph commented on Shep and Bernice's relationship. "Insultin' each other and squabbling

seems to be the only way they can get along."

"Ohhh, we get along fine," Shep said. "She's crazy as a bedbug. That's what gives me fits at night when I see her."

"You sure it ain't her poisoning your supper that's giving you fits?" I smiled.

"If that's true," Shep rose from the table, placed his hat on his head, smoothed out the brim. Ralph stood, grinned at both men. Shep nodded to me and said: "Then she's been feeding you the same poison, my friend."

Ralph guffawed, shook his head, and trailed Shep to the diner exit. The door opened swiftly and the bells chimed. The door snapped shut once they were out on the street corner. Reverend Keyes came up to them and spoke.

The side door by the kitchen and bathrooms opened. A grizzled black man entered, wearing a straw porkpie hat and a black and white striped button-up port authority shirt. His brown trousers were stained, and his loafers had a hole in the left shoe. The black man stood between the counter and the bathrooms. He caught belligerent gazes from everyone but Scratch but Bernice and I. He didn't know to leave or sit down.

"Go on and sit, Russell," Bernice said. "Go ahead, honey, I'll get you a cup of coffee."

"Can I get a cup of tea instead? Doc Foley says it's better for me," Russell said.

"Of course. Go on and sit at the end of the counter and we'll get you set with bacon and eggs."

"Thank you, Miss Bernice."

"Well!" Bernice screeched. "Go on about your business!" she told the rest of the diner's patrons. All eyes leveled off of Russell, chatter started up again.

"Bernice?" I called to her.

She shuffled over to the table, eyeing the dirty dishes Shep and Ralph left.

"What?" she said impatiently.

"Who's the old geezer?"

"Russell?"

"Mm."

"He works in the kitchen helping Ta out. Washes dishes, cooks some. What of it? You want him outta here, too?"

I was taken back by the question.

"No." I gave Bernice a dissatisfied look. "I'm asking who he is, is all. Never seen him here before."

"He's not from here. He's from Rockford County."

"Oh." I nodded. "Well, okay."

"Okay! Can I get back to runnin' a diner, please?"

"All yours, ma'am."

Bernice rolled her eyes and went to the kitchen.

I looked down at the yolk running into my fries. I quickly dropped my fork and chased after Shep and Ralph. I brushed past Bernice, bumped her big bottom slightly. She almost dropped a platter full of plates for the Wooten brothers. She steadied the platter and gasped. Then laughed uproariously and shook her fist at me. I went out the door, the bells chimed once more to the annoyance of the other patrons of the diner.

Reverend Keyes was outside, staring at the sky. He was a tall, frail man in a white button-down shirt and slim black glasses. A swift breeze kept blowing his thin blue tie upwards, smacking him in the chin.

I greeted him as soon as he left the diner threshold.

"Reverend, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Mr. Cole. Glorious day the Lord has created."

"Yeah." I looked up to the blue sky, sun beaming down harshly on the autumn trees. "I suppose so."

"I hope you can look into this, Sheriff," Reverend Keyes said.

"Well We have another matter at hand " Shep shifted his eyes toward Ralph, who was looking down at his shoes.

"I can swing by and look for you Sheriff " Ralph said, kicking at loose stone on the sidewalk.

"I really think it's something that needs tending to, Sheriff," Reverend Keyes pleaded. His tiny black eyes peered at Shep.

"What seems to be the trouble?" I inserted myself in the conversation.

"Reverend Keyes has been hearing voices in the basement of the church," Ralph said. There was an undertone of embarrassment at the concern of Keyes and irritation he had to explain the situation.

"I believe the Sheriff and his Deputy think I'm crazy," Reverend Keyes tried to insert humor, but his delivery was flat. He tilted his head up, glared at the sun. His eyes were glossed over; all emotion drained from his voice. "I look to the skies, past the sun, and to the stars. That's where they wait for us."

Uncomfortable silence followed. Lots of glances passed back and forth. Everyone waited to comment, until Shep spoke.

"Ohhh, come on, Reverend," Shep protested. "We don't think you're crazy." Shep grimaced. He shrugged, punctuated with this: "Maybe, just maybe you're overworked. Trying too hard to run the church without Phyllis and help at the homeless kitchen—"

"Sheriff." Keyes placed a hand on Shep's shoulder. Shep pulled away slightly and Keyes' hand fell away, slowly returning to his sides. "I assure you I'm doing fine without that woman. Phyllis is " He let the sentence drift off. "She is more than likely happier where she is with Buck Langham. Even if it's a sinful life." He shook his head, thought about the next words to come from his crooked lips. "Sometimes you

can't save someone from themselves." Keyes looked away, caught in thought momentarily. He gave everyone a halfhearted smile. "I'm going to have my breakfast. Good day, boys."

Keyes entered the Owl, the door slamming behind him.

"There was something odd going on between you guys," I said.

"It's nothing, Dick." Shep flashed a quick smile.

"I wouldn't say nothing, Shep. I saw the way you two danced with each other. Something between you two."

Shep made a face. "Like I said," he raised his voice slightly, "it's nothing. Let it be, huh?"

Shep stepped off the curb and went to the Sheriff's car parked on the side of the street in front of the hardware store. Several vehicles stopped momentarily at a stop light, and when it changed to green, they inched along and revved up speed up a hill.

He turned to me and Ralph, glared before getting half-way in the passenger's side of the car.

"Well?" he yelled to us. "Are you coming?"

Reluctantly, we shuffled toward the car and Shep. This was my chance to ask Ralph two things in a hushed voice.

"Ralph?"

"Yes, Dick?"

"Two questions before we get in earshot of the Sherriff."

"Okay," he said in a tired voice. "Shoot."

"What's in the basement of Reverend Keyes Church?"

"Nothing, Dick," Ralph said. "Nothing but darkness and mold."

Something in Keyes' voice and demeanor makes me think otherwise. Way Ralph said it was disingenuous.

"Second question for you," I said.

Ralph sighed heavily. They were almost to the Sheriff's car. Ralph removed his keys from his trouser pocket. "If you gotta."

"Where the hell are we going?"

Ralph smiled mischievously, placed a hand on the door handle. "Oh," he opened the unlocked back door. "You'll see."

WE DROVE down route 19 just outside of Odarko. A few scattered houses were among flat land and wooded areas. A handful of ranches came next. We turned down a lane with the name Robert Callum on the mailbox. Callum was someone I did not get along with. Leo had sent me to Callum's ranch to take pictures of his daily routine a while back. I never fully understood what Leo wanted with Callum. I tried to ask, but Leo waved off the question, so I let it ride.

Callum and his men caught me on the ranch. They destroyed the camera and began to destroy me. Callum's wife Abby stopped it. From there, every year or so, Callum had tried to get even with me by calling Shep to say I was peeping on Abby, or I tried to kill his dog, or what have you. He tried to land me in jail. Leo or Shep would intervene. Callum was the perfect adversary. He would start out with bad intentions and end up a hero to the community.

I had to voice my concerns.

"W-w-why! Why the hell are we coming here? You can p-p-pull over here and let me out."

I found myself rubbing my chin incessantly and began stuttering again. When I was a child I had an awful stutter until I was sixteen. My last year at school, an art teacher, Fiona Krueh, worked with me

every day. Taught me not to get so upset and let my thoughts control my tongue. That wasn't the only thing the thirty-two-year-old woman taught me. She was a widow and hadn't had a lover in many years. Her husband died in a car wreck when they were twenty-two and all those years she'd been alone and lonely.

When I went away to college, Fiona Krueh had killed herself. I was distraught and left college. I wandered around the East Coast, playing at odd jobs, working hard to develop a drinking problem, and ended up as a bail bondsman assistant. Which led me to Private Investigating work. I went back to Baltimore and fell in love. I followed Addie to Oklahoma where she promptly dropped like a box of hot rocks. The drinking continued, as well as peeping for customers and eventually working for Reliant.

Rubbing my chin and stuttering came and went. This had become a nervous tick, even more so, after I stopped drinking.

After a two-day bender, I flipped out, prompting Shep and Ralph to take me to Oklahoma City General and place him in the care of Doctor Titus, a renowned Psychiatrist. I spent six months in there before releasing myself. It took the authorities another month to find me. They brought me back to OKC General. I fell in line with the rest of society. I was clean and sober. The authorities released me two months later.

The whole thing was a blur.

"Hold on, Dick," Shep said. "Just hear us out."

"Callum needs our help," Ralph said.

"That man has tried to rid me of this world by bodily harm or ruin my name." I dug my nails into my knees to keep from stammering. "Why would I want to help him?"

"He didn't ask for you," Shep said. "Abby did."

The police car pulled into the driveway of a weather-beaten ranch-style house. No farm hands were around. No live stock was on the

premises. This was strange. But I could swear I heard them. A distant moo, an echo of crowing.

Very strange.

We got out of the car and went to the front door. I dragged along, looking over my shoulder, expecting one of Callum's cronies to jump me. There was a bad vibe that irked me. All my senses were on fire. Something the bail bondsman job taught me. When you're somewhere you aren't supposed to be, doing something you're not supposed to be doing, i.e. breaking into houses, watching people, going through their trash, let your gut rule your mind. If it feels like a shit storm, then it's a shit storm.

Abby appeared at the screen door. Her yellow hair sparkled in the driving sunlight, and those piercing blue eyes still hypnotized. She pushed open the screen door, stepping off the porch momentarily. She looked down at the ground as she spoke.

"Hey, all."

"Howdy, Abby." Shep tipped his hat. "We brought somebody, per your wishes."

"I see." Abby shifted her eyes to mine, shot them back to the ground. "Dick. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Abby," I said. "You asked for me?"

"I did. Let's all go inside." She walked briskly to the front porch and held the door for the three of us to enter.

Ralph nodded to Abby, flashing a smile. Ralph wasn't fond of Callum either. Callum and his brother apparently used to bully Ralph when they were kids. That went on for years until the last year of high school when Ralph got even with both Callum boys. At the schoolhouse there was a long cobble wall separating the building and the walkway. Ralph was on one side of the wall and the Callum boys were on the other, cutting up with their friends. Ralph dumped a bucket of yellow

paint on both Callum boys, and when they were busy freaking out about the paint being dropped on them, Ralph took a two-by-four and beat the living shit out of them.

Callum brought that incident up every time he saw Ralph. Ralph would laugh and say: "Yeah. Good times."

Inside, the house was a mess. Abby was embarrassed by it, smiling slightly as we all went by stacks of newspapers piled up on the floor, dust on all the furniture, clothing left in different areas. Callum was actually sitting in his chair in front of the TV, his body raised some by two pairs of slacks and several shirts, in spite of his lackluster sedentary. Dirty dishes lay on the coffee table; glasses, coffee cups sat on end tables by ash trays and on the carpeted floor. Abby moved some clothes from a rocking chair.

"You boys sit," she tried to sound jovial, only her voice fell flat, tone was of loss and sadness.

"No thanks, Abby," Shep said. "I'll stand. We only have a few minutes. Dick has another appointment."

Ralph sat in the rocking chair. "I'll sit, Abby." He gave her a toothy grin. "My dogs are barking." He chuckled.

I cleared my throat. "Bob, how are you doin'?"

Callum cut his eyes at me. "Okay," he said wearily. "Been tired a lot."

"Understandable," I watched Callum carefully. Noticed his hands were shaking something fierce. I noticed the same thing with Abby when she opened the front door. "You work hard on this ranch."

Again Callum cut his eyes at me, searching for knowledge of who was talking to him. Momentary light went off behind his. "Yep," he said, the light was gone just that quick. His eyes drifted back to the TV.

After the commercial ended, Rod Serling's voice could be heard. He did his intro for the *Twilight Zone* and the episode began. Serling's

narration described a hillbilly hunting with his hound dog named Rip. They stay out all night, Rip follows a raccoon into a river, and the old man goes in with him.

I was momentarily mesmerized by the words spoken. I continued to watch until Ralph sneezed. I turned and all eyes were on him to urge him to start the conversation.

"Where's your help, Bob?" I asked after a few minutes of no talking.

"Home, I reckon." Callum kept his eyes glued to the TV.

"They don't work for you anymore?"

"They stopped coming to work," Abby said.

"They did?" Ralph asked.

"Yes," Abby said.

"Don't you think that's a bit strange, Abby?" Shep said. "Some of those men have been working for this ranch since Bob's father ran it."

"I don't know what to think anymore, Shep," Abby said, her bottom lip trembling. She sounded beat. Worn out. Frail, even. "Everything is all sideways."

"Bob?" I threw some attention Callum's way.

"What?" he said.

"What happened to the animals?" I asked.

"Nothing!" Callum looked at me like I was stupid or insane. "There still out there doing their bit. Working hard. Something you never did."

Instead of getting incensed, I gave concerned glances to Shep and Ralph. They returned the looks gravely. Shep took a few steps and parted the curtains. No animals were out there. Shep looked at me and shook his head.

"We didn't ask for you to talk about the animals, Dick," Abby said.

"I didn't ask for you at all!" Callum chipped in.

"Okay! I asked for Dick Cole because I know he can help us get our daughter back! You mean old man!" Abby choked back tears and turned

her head toward the wall.

"What happened to Emily?" I asked.

"We don't know," Callum said softly. "One night she didn't come home."

"How long ago was this?"

"The other day, Dick," Shep said. "Abby called me yesterday morning. Ralph and I looked all over. Only clue we have is she was seen in Darktown."

"That's why you want me to help?" I said.

Shep shrugged. "You can go in there with no trouble. Ralph and me well."

I can only go there with Ajax. If I get caught out there, Smokey Longley, who runs Zachery, will have my ass on a silver platter.

"We'll pay you," Callum's voice broke. "We'll pay anything to get Emily back."

He shivered as he sobbed hard, rocking back and forth in his chair. Abby rushed to Callum, cradling his head in her arms.

"Bob Dick here will help no matter what," Ralph said. "He don't care about past differences. Do you, Dick?"

"Water under the bridge, Bob," I said. Of course, that wasn't the truth at all. But these people needed my help.

Callum pulled away from Abby's embrace.

"You will?" His voice creaked.

"Of course I'll help," I said. "Of course."

We left Abby and Callum in the living room comforting each other in the same moment as arguing loudly. I stopped in the middle of the driveway and listened. Regrets. Temptations and constant anger were among the topics. Callum was the subdued, depressed voice. Abby was the loud, obnoxious voice. The accuser. The abuser. The consoling, panicked soul.

Those were the adverbs anyone in Odarko would describe Robert Callum. Not Abby Callum

I heard her use the word “nigger” quite a bit. In what reference, I wasn’t sure. I heard body blows. Loud weeping. A hard, driving voice. I started for the door. Listening closer, I realized Abby was the one delivering those slaps and the sobbing belonged to Callum.

Suddenly the front door flew open and Abby stepped out on the walkway. I rushed down to the drive, close on Ralph’s heels.

“Dick? Can I talk to you?”

I stopped in my tracks. I turned swiftly. “Sure, Abby.” I paced my steps, found myself face to face with a woman who had lived a hard life and at one time was very beautiful.

“Yes?” I tried to smile, but the strangeness of everything made me sound frightened. Truth be told, I was definitely spooked.

“Whatever you find out,” Abby said, “tell me first. Would you?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Sure. Abby?”

“Yes?”

“Did Emily have any boyfriends?”

“Why ” She gave a long pause. Her eyes darted back and forth. She was offended. Or holding back information? I couldn’t tell. “No, Dick. Emily doesn’t have time for a social life. With school and all. She’s a freshman at Zachery.”

“That’s a black college,” I said.

“All sorts go there.” Her eyes burned red as she said that.

I nodded.

“Dick?” Shep called out from the police car.

“Yeah?” I called back.

“Come on,” Shep let his voice echo in the dead ranch. “You got business elsewhere, right? Well, we do, too!”

“I’ll give you a call, Abby,” I said as I walked down the driveway.

"Thank you, Dick," Abby said.

I wasn't sure I wanted to leave the Callums to themselves. More than mischief could happen. I pushed myself to the police car, regardless. I stood at the open car door before getting in the backseat.

"Dollops," Shep said. "That's what those two are. Damned dollops."

"I wouldn't exactly call them dollops, Shep," I said.

Shep studied my face. He chuckled. "Dick, my friend. You see clues everywhere don't you?"

"Step in that house again, Shep. And you'll find clues to multiple misgivings over the years."

"Maybe so," Shep said. "I'm old now, friend, and these crow's feet are not just from skin aging. It's from too many sleepless nights. I need my sleep nowadays. Let's solve one problem at a time, huh?"

"Something ain't right about those two," Ralph said. "I pity Abby. Good woman to stand by that man."

"Be careful how you throw 'Good' around in Odarko, Ralph," I said.

Ralph surveyed the surroundings. He was spooked too.

"He said the animals were out here, Shep," Ralph said. "I don't see any animals."

"I know that, Ralph," Shep told him. "I know."

"Ralph is urging you to keep your eye on the Cullums," I said. "Like I'm trying to do."

"Oh," Shep got in the car. "Let's get the hell out of here before you two old biddy's start henning on me!"

FROM THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OCCULT
ARTIFACTS
BY RUSSEL DE'BLANC

(Copyright 1969)

THE OBJECT

Color: Black

5 x 5 x 12 inches

Weight: 7 ounces.

Made of Unknown material—sometimes described as made of granite, other times silk or unknown fabric.

THE OBJECT, often referred to as the Obelisk, was discovered in 1935 by Charles Shandt in Egypt during an exploration of the Tomb of Orasis, one of many of spellbinding Doctors that served King Tutankhamun, a pharaoh that ruled 1332-1323 BC. Discovering the purpose of the Obelisk became Shandt's lifelong obsession. In his research that took him all over the world, several of these statues would pop up in the strangest areas: Nigeria, Paris, Atlanta, Georgia, Ukraine, and Thailand.

Shandt wrote in his diaries that many people who found the statue had seen bright lights in the sky and the object fall to the ground. Upon touching the Obelisk, they immediately lose or discover time gaps, or chronological events of their lives have no order, often repeating key

moments several times before moving on. A priest in Paris told Shandt that he would often find himself making tea for a young lady he eventually impregnated and resulted in his dismissal from the church. This young lady became his wife, but he kept reliving that moment where he made her tea and a meal, next finding himself caring for their toddler, and jumping back to the tea and meal, then to the point of seeing his wife bedridden, dying of cancer, back to the tea and meal, and forward to taking his son to school, back to the tea and meal, forward to his wife and he listening to their son act on a radio program.

SHEP and Ralph dropped me off at my car. The '71 AMC Javelin, a two-door convertible I bought from Sam Musty, was still parked in front of the Owl. Sam Musty was a car dealer who had marital problems. Musty gave me a fifty percent markdown for the job I performed. I took pictures of his wife attending a convention and sleeping with every aluminum siding salesman in Tulsa, sometimes three at a time. The black Javelin with two holes in the left side door from a .45 two years ago rolled down route 19 and headed toward Rockford County.

The .45 was fired by an eighty-year-old Mexican who thought I was out to steal his champion Chihuahua. He was a piss-poor shot, and most of the bullets sideswiped a barrage of trees twenty feet from my car. I stopped in the middle of the man's driveway, got out, and trotted over to him just as he was trying to load another again. I swatted the .45 out of his hand. After I screamed at him and assured him I was only looking for a man stealing license plates and was working for the Sherriff's department, he apologized in Spanish for having stopped me from chasing down an assailant.

I never did catch that license plate thief in the VW bug. I did, however, sell the old Mexican's .45 at Odarko East Pawn shop for fifty bucks.

Before I pulled out of the parking lot, I saw a man in a dark trench coat and dark fedora watching me. I couldn't see his face. My head began to ache something fierce. I closed my eyes to shake off the headache. I reopened them to find the man was gone. Once in a while, I'll see this man, and the headaches will come.

The headaches, the mysterious man watching me other strangeness didn't happen to me until I came to Odarko.

I had the idea to go to the Tahiti first, ask some questions about Bobby Clarke's death, then circle around to Darktown and look for Emily Callum. On to Rockford County.

It was only twenty miles from Odarko, and in the spring of nineteen seventy- five, they began building the largest rock quarry in the state. Funny enough, Reliant was one of the companies funding this monstrosity that man seems to think he needs. The other companies were Aton, a telecommunications company, and Reitzen, a peanut butter retailer. What peanut butter and telephone lines have to do with a quarry is beyond my thinking, except how much money the owners can make in the long run.

Rockford County was mostly trailer parks and furniture stores. Other than that, it was a depressed area, even more so than Darktown, or Zachery, as it's now known. Before I was out the door of Reliant, Leo rushed down in the elevator to let him know he would call the Sheriff of Rockford to assist me in any capacity. Odd how far Reliant Corporation influence extended. For all he knew, their money probably influenced what coffee is served in Paris.

I passed by Lowden. The rest stop was a small, brown building, resembling what would sit in a deserted farm. Vines had attached themselves to the building, strangling the life out of it. I eased the car up to the payphone that was a small box made of aluminum siding with

a rectangle piece of glass for a window. That was where the phone call was made to me the night before.

I pulled away and the car's tires kicked up dust.

Keeping my mind busy as I passed an endless amount of flatland became a terrible habit for me, since I was traveling more and more lately. I turned the radio on and heard a radio interview between a Rock and Roll singer David Bowie and a DJ. Bowie spoke of his trials and tribulations of being a rock star and getting inside the skins of the characters he creates for the stage and recordings. I like one or two of his songs. He's a fascinating person. Yet I couldn't feel sympathy for someone making millions. Then he cleared it up that he never made millions. His former manager inflated the rumor, built him up as a star. When he did start making money, he was celebrity rich: everything on credit from the record label.

That was an enlightened moment.

I wondered if Bobby Clarke had the same problem. David Bowie was in the midst of suing his former management. Did Clarke threaten to sue, make plans of leaving the record label?

As my mind swung back and forth between thoughts of Clarke, Emily Callum, Leo, and what I had done to the man I didn't know, my head started to split. Pounded so hard, my eyes hurt. A terrible ringing was in my ears. Milliseconds later, the ringing changed into a droning squeal.

Suddenly, I saw something resembling a mirage.

Or what I thought was a mirage.

The Indian Summer Oklahoma was experiencing was just an extension of blistering heat that began in May. By my watch, it was only eleven thirty a.m. and it was already eighty-nine degrees. The sun and speed of the car matching the outside temperature, made an image

several hundred feet away flicker. That was the initial reasoning that the image of a man scattered like dots seemed like a mirage.

The car raced closer to that man and showed he was shuffling along, almost stumbling on the other side of the road. He would shift between the solid lines and the curb. His hair was shaggy, almost to his shoulder, and that was more shocking to me than the man's dirty dungarees or long beard. He seemed to be carrying a bag close to his chest, basically guarding it with his life.

I pulled the car over, way over, stopping in front of the man. The man stopped, too. He stared at me, jerked his head to the landscape. He tried to ignore the machine in front of him.

I knew him.

Davis Goode.

Framed photographs of him were all over Reliant office building.

"Mr. Goode," I called out to him, "need a ride?"

Several moments passed before he answered. The man still refused to acknowledge me, or that my vehicle even existed.

"Mr. Goode? I'm Dick Cole. We met a few years ago. I actually work for you. Why are you out here? Look, it's hotter than hell out here. Hop in the car. I'll take you anywhere you like."

"I'm headed to glory," the man said. "Looking for justice. Peace of mind. That's out of your way, mister."

He was different. Years ago his demeanor was jovial. Too jovial. He played his second wife's young children. Happy to see everyone. Shook everyone's hand. I met him at his daughter's graduation party. I was hired as security. He was dressed to nines, still had a water balloon fight.

This version of him attired as a plumper, taller Charles Manson derelict speed walking the highway, was alarming.

"What makes you think that's out of my way?" I asked.

"It's always out of a human's way," Goode said.

"Hop in," I urged with a hand. "We can look for that place together."

Goode sighed heavily. His movements were like a scared, confused animal, not sure if he should run, or just let fate take care of him.

"Look," I yelled. "It's damn hot out here. Either tell me to get the hell out of your way, or jump in the car."

Goode slowly came to the car. He noticed the top was down, and with a convertible, he didn't have to open a door. He climbed in clumsily.

"All right," I said, putting the car in gear. "Let's roll."

The car got moving and Goode looked uneasy. His spaced-out eyes kept scanning me, the highway in front of us, and the front seat. I watched him carefully, remembering that I had a Smith and Wesson .38 under the seat if I needed it. Now, I'm not in the habit of shooting spaced-out corporate leaders. Still, I've always had the mindset that I would protect myself no matter who it was.

"I'm a little curious," I said after a while, my foot flooring the gas pedal; the Javelin sped north on the highway. We passed a sign indicating Rockford County was fifteen miles away.

Goode grunted, hunched his shoulders up. "What about?"

"The bag," I said. "You wouldn't happen to have a couple of burgers in there, would you?"

"This bag is my business!" Goode growled.

"Okay," I shrugged. "No reason to get bent out of shape."

"Who's bent out of shape?!" Goode jerked his head around quickly to give me a dirty look. "I'm not bent of shape! Got it, buddy!?"

"Whoa " I chuckled, kept my eyes on the road, but with a sideways glance at the man once in a while. "Just making conversation."

He fumed. His eyes zeroed in on me, where they stayed for a good while. His saggy, large lips formed a tight o shape like he just ate

something sour. Nothing else was said for several minutes as we came closer to a series of shanties. Finally, those eyes eased their relentless glare and shifted away from me. He was lost in some memory or a series of thoughts, staring out the windshield.

"You ever felt the long cold shadow of death stalking you?" Goode asked.

"Not lately," I said. "No, I haven't."

I eased my left hand from my lap to the seat, but kept my right hand on the steering wheel. Slowly, my fingers dipped off the vinyl seat, ready to snatch that.38 if need be.

Goode glanced at me. "The downward doom, is what you need to be afraid of."

"I'm afraid of it right now."

"You make jokes. This is not a humorous situation," Goode chided.

"I didn't say it was, Mister Goode," I told him. I thought about other things. The task at hand, Leo sending me to Rockford County, helping the Callums find their teenage daughter Alice in her white silk nightie suddenly I remembered what I was going to say.

I blurted out: "Why the hell are you out here?"

Goode was lost in the clouds. He was like a bad Richard Burton imitator in a horrible rendition of a Shakespeare play. He even moved his hands outward and looked to the heavens as he recited a poem.

"Feeling,

Unwound.

Breathing,

Marbled sound.

Water bubbling,

Trapped in lungs,

Sing that swansong.

*Ears pound,
Don't hear,
Dogs of doom near,
Don't fear,
The light will bring
You round
Here.
Long gone dead,
Heaven? Hell?
Water holding you down,
But there's a surprise
In the end.
Long gone dead,
Heaven? Hell?
State of mind?
Body and soul to lend?
Answers you know to pretend."*

There was a long silence afterwards.

I was even more nervous than before he recited that poem. My fingers touched the butt of the .38, nearly grasping it.

"I didn't want to do it," Goode said, closing his eyes briefly as if pain surged through the stretchy bands of his brain. He reopened them and added calmly: "They made me. Those rotten bastards. They said I had no choice. Their eyes are everywhere. Their voices can be heard wherever you go. You can never run away. That droning noise infiltrates your ears, your mind They see all, hear all, and control all."

"Who are we talking about?" I asked. "The government? The phone company?"

Goode said, "A horrible white building with white walls, white tables, white coats "

"A hospital? You talking about doctors now?"

Goode bowed his head. "No a ship "

"I'm confused," I told him. "A ship in the ocean—"

"They don't travel by our means!" Goode screamed. "Up there," he pointed. "They travel the skies "

"UFO ?" I asked in a discerning voice.

He nodded, then quickly shook his head no, nodded again. This action went on for some time.

I didn't know what to say except: "I see. Your family know you're out here, wandering around?" He didn't answer so I asked, "You were in a hospital?"

He nodded but said, "No. Not exactly. They kept telling me I was."

"I'm confused," I asked. I was getting annoyed real fast. So I yelled at him. "Which is it, fella? You were in a hospital or—" He interrupted with a kind of squeal. So I shut up. A few minutes passed with nothing said. He broke the silence.

"Some men they came and took me from my home," he sighed. "They took my briefcase; they used my finances to create Death Damn those bastards!"

"You keep talking about death, Mr. Goode. I'm getting depressed."

"That's not all you'll get, my friend," he said. "You'll be swimming in the canals of Hell. And you won't even know how you got there."

"You talking fire and brimstone, Mr. Goode?"

"Stop calling me that," he said grimly.

"You don't want me to call you by your name?"

"Hurts my head. I don't want to be called anything. The waves of destruction are calmed when I'm not referred to as that man."

I was definitely scared. He got more and more agitated, ringing his hands violently.

Goode said, "Tell them not to drink anything it is better to wither away like me."

"What are we talking about?" I asked.

"I'm not talking about fairy tales, damn it. I'm talking real life. The water you drink. The milk the children drink the oatmeal the old ones consume "

"Is that a fact?"

"You're patronizing me," he said.

I said, "Actually I'm driving and trying very hard to understand what you're saying."

A noise came from his pursed lips. "If you listen hard enough, you'll understand."

"I understand this," I said as he turned off route 19 on to a paved road that lead to a series of run-down flat buildings. "We're where I need to be. Where can I drop you, mister—" I caught myself, chuckled. "Can I drop you off at a friend's house or the hospital?"

"No please no hospital nowhere like that I " he started to say. He looked at me with moist eyes, got choked up. "I really don't want to be dropped off. You-you speak of being scared. I'm terrified."

I maneuvered the Javelin into a parking lot where a greenish-blue stucco building sat with one large bald cypress looming over. A sign out front informed the residents of Rockford County the building was the Sheriff's department.

Goode became uneasy. He shook a little, adjusting in his seat, bouncing slightly.

"Don't take me there, please," he said.

"This is where I'm going," I told him.

"I'll die if I go back—"

Before I could say anything else or the car could come to a full stop, Goode jumped out of the convertible. He landed on his feet like a cat and sprinted to the side street where a bar was and disappeared behind the bushes. I was amazed at how graceful the man was, and even more amazed at how fast he was.

I eased the car into a parking space same time as a deputy shot out the front door. He was tall, gangly, with wild movements, not knowing if he should run to me or back through the door he held open. He stopped briefly and said, "That fella just jump out of your car?"

"Apparently so," I said.

"Now why did he go and do a fool thing like that?"

"I don't know." I flashed a smile and shrugged. "I was just giving him a ride. Do you know who Davis Goode is?"

The deputy shook his head. "No. Never heard of him."

"No report of anyone by that name missing?"

"No. None at all. Is that who that was?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"He just jumped out of your car without waiting for a full stop?"

I nodded.

"Takes all kinds I guess." He placed one foot on the threshold and was ready to close the door when I called out to him.

"Uh, Deputy?"

He turned his goofy contorted body in a complete circle like a dog does when it's trying to find a comfortable spot to lie down. The deputy looked shocked to hear someone refer to him as such. He raised an eyebrow and said, "Yeah?"

"I'm Richard Cole."

A complex string of facial expressions enlightened the world the deputy was confused.

"I'm supposed to meet up with Sheriff Doyle?"

The deputy was still lost.

"The situation that happened last night at the Tahiti?"

"Oh." Understanding jolted the young, gangly man with short wild hair. "I'm Deputy Hurtz."

"Good to know. So "

"So ?"

"Where is Sheriff Doyle?"

"Right!" Hurtz looked to the side street. "He's at lunch right now."

I waited for more information but none was forthcoming anytime soon. I glared at Hurtz. Time passed. Neither of us said a word. Hurtz nodded. I nodded along with him. He surveyed his surroundings with a roaming eye, glanced back at me.

Finally I said, "Where did he go? Maybe I can catch up with him?"

Hurtz blinked.

"Which restaurant is he at?" I asked.

Hurtz chuckled, placed his hands on his waist, and realized he didn't have his gun or gun belt on. He shrugged, forgave himself, and smiled hugely at me.

"Only one restaurant in Rockford. That's the Sunny Days. Got some of the best fried chicken you'll ever eat," Hurtz said happily.

"Good to know. Maybe I'll grab some. Can you tell me whereabouts this Sunny Days is located?"

He pointed to the same side street Goode ran down. "You could take Main Street, but a short cut through there would take you right to Sunny Days."

"Much obliged." I saluted with two fingers pointed at my forehead and backed out of the parking space.

IT WASN'T much to look at. That's what I thought when I saw the restaurant from a distance. The Sunny Days restaurant was really just a weather-beaten ranch-style house with holes in the netting of the screen door that was barely hanging on. The ramp to the porch was missing planks, and paint had peeled, and or, faded so badly it was hard to tell if the color was pale white or at one time maroon. Regardless, the Sunny Days was an eye sore.

A fat man in a suit too small for him and a tie too loud for anyone's eyes came stumbling down the ramp. Burping and bug-eyed, his jowls bright red, as if his arteries were about to explode. A woman in a polka-dot dress and polka-dot heels shadowed him with lush steps in contrast to the fat man's bold, brash missteps. She was not an eyesore by any standard. Just a bit overweight, she filled that dress exquisitely. She was most definitely younger than the fat man and her French accent cut right through any of the sounds outside the restaurant, natural or man-made.

"Let's go home, Daddy." She rushed to take his oak tree-like arm in hers and licked his earlobe. She practically dragged him to their Lincoln and he helped her in with playful, grabby hands. She giggled and off they went.

"Yeah, right, sure," I said. "She's definitely his daughter." I chuckled and shook my head.

I entered the smoke-filled room with very little lighting from the overhead chandelier and a bit of sunlight peering through the slats. There was a long bar in the middle of the room and a piano with five inches of dust. Tables were made of glass and covered with dingy white tablecloths. There were about ten people in total inside the restaurant. They either hung over at the bar or stuffed their faces with day-old seafood. I hated seafood. The smell alone, no matter what kind – fish, muscles, or what have you – made me want to vomit. Watching someone dig into flakey white flesh of a water creature that ate other water creatures' shit disgusted me.

I ambled over to Sheriff Doyle's table. He was a large man, not width but height. His body dwarfed the table and its contents. It looked to me the man's hands were having trouble grasping things with his oversized mitts.

"You Doyle?" I asked.

Sheriff's eyes widened. He dropped his fork in the plate of half-eaten catfish.

"Let me guess," Doyle said, grimacing. His voice sounded like he had a hearing problem and when I looked closer as I sat in the opposite chair, I could see a makeshift hearing aid inside Doyle's left ear. He stopped chewing and spoke very loudly. "You're Dick Cole?"

I ran a hand through my hair, then rested it on the table. Doyle looked shocked at the audacity of me taking a seat at his table. I unfolded a napkin, pushed the knife, fork and spoon off, and proceeded to wipe sweat from my neck and forehead.

"Hot out there," I informed Doyle. "Hot for October, ain't it?"

"I guess this means I can't finish my catfish?" Doyle said.

"I'd eat with you, Sheriff, but my stomach can't take the smell of rotting seafood."

"Son of a bitch." Doyle drew in air and exhaled sharply. He pushed the plate away from him. "I guess we should get started!" Doyle jumped out of his seat.

"I need to make a call first," I stood slowly. "This joint have a phone?"

Doyle eyed me suspiciously. I could tell he didn't like the length of my hair. He didn't like my clothes. He didn't like my use of the jargon "joint". A white man using words such as that was suspect to a law enforcement officer even in nineteen seventy-five. I could almost read his mind: damn hippies!

"Over at the bar." Doyle lifted a finger. "By the kitchen is a payphone."

I smiled, stood quickly, kicking the chair out of my way. It slid across the tiled floor with ease. "Just be a few minutes."

I found the payphone, let a man exit the bathroom, brush past me before I fed the coin slot a dime. I dialed the number and Ajax immediately answered.

"What?"

"Is that the way you greet your best friend?" I said.

Took a moment for that statement to register in Ajax's mind. He chuckled and howled in the phone. I pulled the receiver from my ear. I placed it back when Ajax began to speak.

"Dick Cole, you jerk! Why haven't you been to my playhouse?"

Ajax, aka Ainsley Powers, was an actor with a criminal past. Once or twice I helped him out of a few jams. He was what they called a "cleaner". Hence the nickname Ajax. He was frequently employed to clean up locations of violent crimes and remove dead bodies. Being black, Ajax had connections to the black community and once worked for

Dozen Jones, a midget kingpin working in pornography in Darktown. While in prison the second time for mail order fraud, which he was innocent of and railroaded by the D.A., Ajax took up acting. I was able to prove his innocence on the mail order fraud, freed after two years. He owed me ever since.

"Ajax, my friend, you know I hate live theater. It bores me to death."

Ajax laughed. "C'mon, Dick. I have the perfect part for you in my play. A down-and-out detective who can't solve any crimes."

"Oh, well I solved the one that got you out of jail." I laughed. "Peeping in little old ladies' windows."

"Best thing to happen to me since failing to manage that blues man's career. At least Felicia ain't around to make my life hell."

"Sorry to hear she ran off with Butter Bean."

"I ain't," Ajax said. "She got his drunk ass holed up in a New York slum bussin' the streets to buy booze. So when will I see your sorry ass?"

"Tonight actually," I said.

"That's fantastic! Come by the house. Mona will fry up some chicken and we'll sit and talk until the sun comes up."

"I doubt either of us will get a chance."

"Oh. Got an angle?"

"A sharp corner, Ajax."

"Spin the record, brother."

"Got hired for two things," I said. "One I can't tell you what it is until the news has been released. The other I need your help with. Run away girl. White girl. Last seen headed to Darktown."

"Okay. Let me write the particulars down." Ajax left the phone. He returned, urged me to keep going. "Give it to me."

"Emily Callum," I said. "Nineteen. Light brown hair, brown eyes. Five three."

"Got it. I'll ask around. Can't be too hard to find a white girl here."

"Thanks, Ajax."

"Anytime, my brother."

Ajax rang off. I stood there, holding the receiver in my hand, thinking how great it was to talk to Ajax again. I felt eyes on me. I turned slowly and saw Sheriff Doyle glaring at me. I smiled at the man, nodded and placed the receiver on the cradle attached to the wall.

THE TAHITI SAT down in a hill from the highway like a hidden motif in a bad poem about dark Gothic worlds inhabited by ghosts.

I followed Doyle to the motel. Doyle parked sideways across three parking spaces. He got out of the police car and stood leaning on the open door. His small dark eyes glared at me. I got out of the Javelin slowly, walked around the motel as far as the pool, turned back and came toward Doyle.

It was a dingy motel shaped like an L with a dirty little swimming pool with dirty brown water. Each tiny room had its own entrance. Bobby Clarke's Ferrari was still parked in front of room 13. I walked to the room, looked at the door with yellow caution tape slapped on it haphazardly. I noticed the door knob was missing.

I turned to Doyle and pointed.

"You see this?"

"What?" Doyle sighed nonchalantly.

"Door knob is missing."

"I think my deputy accidentally knocked it out."

"He did?"

"Yeah," Doyle became defensive. "The knob fell straight through into the other side."

"Inside the room?"

"Yeah," Doyle gritted his teeth.

"That doesn't seem strange to you?" I said.

"Maybe the damn door knob was loose to begin with!"

"Maybe," I said, then pointed to a large dent on the right side of the hole where the doorknob should be. "Caused by some kind of tool. My vote is a hammer."

"I told your bosses I could handle this by myself," Doyle said. He stuck his chest out, let his hand fall to the butt of his .357 in a fake Wild West holster kids usually buy in gift shops.

"Well, I guess they didn't believe you." I went to the corner of the room where women's clothing was piled up next to the bathroom door. Panties, garter, stockings, and light blue dress.

"I have the guilty party in my cell. How else could I prove my competency?" Doyle had some hurt in his breaking voice.

"Guilty party?" I asked.

"Yeah," he sniffed. "Brenda Lee Hayes. She says it's self-defense."

"Was it?"

"What she says," Doyle shrugged. He took a small notepad from the breast pocket on his uniform. He flipped through the pages until he found what he liked. He liked it all right. He re-read the notes and chuckled.

"Hayes said a Negro man came to her office door in nothing but jacket and a sock on his left foot. He was screaming, 'Where is she? Where is the bitch? That bitch stole my money!' Hayes yelled to him through the partially opened door to leave and sleep it off. She shut the door and placed the chain on. The Negro man became even more agitated and proceeded to break down her door with his shoulder. Hayes had her .22 rifle steadied, and when Clarke burst in the office she shot him twice in the chest."

"Did she know who she killed?"

"Well, yeah. Who wouldn't recognize a man on TV as much as Bobby Clarke is—was. He's a big star—was a big star."

I nodded. "I can't disagree with you on that, Sheriff. Where's the body? County morgue?"

Doyle looked at me like was an insane man asking if he could take the bus to Mars. "Well no. M.E. works out of OKC. I thought you investigated cases like this."

"I do. But when my bosses need things done, they don't screw around. You called Jessup Mills?"

"Mister, I don't even know a Jessup Mills. I called the state, of course, and they said they'd send Riley Coolridge down this afternoon."

"You don't want Coolridge. Ambulance took Clarke's body to Central General?"

"No!" That defensive tone crept in again. A lot more agitated. "He's in the restaurant cooler. The one we were just at."

I looked at Doyle, shocked; my mouth formed an o before the words slowly left from my lips.

"He's where?"

I made a face. Automatically, my hand touched my midsection. Doyle ate his lunch where a dead body had been stored. That made me feel even sicker to my stomach than watching Doyle eat seafood.

"At the Sunny Days! Coolridge's boys travel with him with an ambulance. They'll be here this afternoon, okay?!"

"My bosses won't be happy," I said. "They'd rather have the body be at Central General—"

"I don't have their number!" Doyle screamed.

I nodded.

"What about the girl Clarke was with?"

"I don't know where she is. She's gone."

"You didn't retain her?"

"She was gone when we got the hotel! Look, I was woke up out of bed at eleven thirty that night. I was groggy and in a bad mood!"

"Like you are now?" I said.

"Don't smart ass me, boy." Doyle blew air through his nostrils like a bull ready to charge. We stared each other down for a minute or so. Doyle must've counted to ten. His face turned back to the Caucasian color it was before I agitated him.

"I want to see the office, then the body," I said.

The lobby and office was a separate tiny building. A desk with a bell, cubby holes on a loose shelf directly behind. To the right yellow tape sealed off the entrance to the office, where the door barely hung on its hinges. An obvious struggle had ensued. A flimsy, metal desk was turned over. The telephone with its receiver sat among several files, and a few twenties, tens, and ones were mixed in with some change. Papers were everywhere and one loafer, with blood splattered on the front, lay just a tick from the entrance. Two large pools of blood caked on the wood floor.

I turned sideways and saw a shattered glass-framed picture of the town hall. Just below the frame, powder burns marked the wall. Examining closer, I touched the tiny black and grey circles with a finger.

"She used a .22 rifle to shoot Clarke?" I asked.

"Yah," Doyle grunted.

"These marks on the wall couldn't be made by a .22," I said. Doyle looked at me incredulously. "They were made by a shotgun, two blasts, I'd say."

"You'd say?"

"Yeah," I answered slowly. "I'd say." I pointed at the splatter on the wall. "A .22 wouldn't cause a person to fly backwards with such force

nor leave such huge amounts of blood on the wall, unless at close range maybe."

"We have the murder weapon. That contradicts your theory, bub," Doyle chuckled. "I bet you didn't think we had the weapon."

"No," I said. "I knew you had the wrong weapon. I'll bet it comes out no fingerprints are on the rifle."

"I bet you're wrong! Brenda Lee Hayes prints will be on it!"

"No, Sheriff," I said. "Your deputy's prints will be on it. The rifle will be wiped clean."

"That's just plain preposterous," Doyle said.

"Brenda Lee Hayes will be brought to trial, but will change her story. She'll say the missing girl shot him. Or she didn't see who killed Bobby Clarke. Create confusion for the jury. The evidence will come out her prints are not on the murder weapon."

"You sure are speculatin' a lot."

"Somebody involved in this has to," I said. "You find any other guns?"

"Yes. And we did not find your imaginary shotgun."

"What did you find?"

"Smith and Wesson .32," Doyle said.

"I bet that's registered to the owner."

Doyle didn't say anything. He glared at me again, his face beat red once again.

"Yeah," I told him. "I thought so."

"Speakin' of the owner," Doyle read from his notebook. "Brenda Lee Hayes was on the phone with Katherine Bigby when Clarke started the ruckus."

"She heard the whole thing?" I asked.

"Yes," Doyle nodded once. "Even the gunshots."

"What time was all this, Sheriff?"

"Hayes wasn't sure," Doyle said. He looked through his notes. "She said it had to been after ten thirty. Her boss always calls at that time."

"Well," I exited the office. "Show me the body of Bobby Clarke."

DOYLE and I went back to the restaurant. Doyle sped down the alleyway, turned his siren on for a laugh. My Javelin kept up with the Ford, bouncing up and down across bumpy cracked pavement. Two boys in their early teens were tossing a football around in the parking lot of the apartment complex next to Sunny Days. They jumped out of the way of the police car just as the front tire ran over the football, flattened it. Doyle got out of his car, glared at the boys, his hand resting on the butt of his holstered .357.

He dared them to challenge his unmitigated authority. They didn't try. Instead the boys went and sat on some trash cans and had a smoke. Doyle smiled, saluting them.

We went through the back way, around the busy kitchen, where they were cooking for nearly no one in the restaurant, and washing already clean dishes. I trailed Doyle down a flight of stairs. As he went around the corner in the basement, Doyle hit a light switch. Electricity crackled and a blue-yellow stream nearly blinded me.

"Over here," Doyle said.

He took me to a walk-in freezer. He pulled the handle toward him and the door popped open. Doyle flicked another switch. A light flashed, then stayed on that was easier on the eyes. Among the frozen meat

bundled in white paper and vegetables in grey lugs on shelves, was the body of Bobby Clarke wrapped in a multi-colored quilt.

I couldn't help but feel this was worse than being in a morgue. In some morbid way, an idea popped into my head. What if they planned on eating Bobby Clarke? That would be more disrespectful than burying a body in a shallow grave and definitely on par with dumping a human being in a trash can or a dumpster.

I shuffled my feet, hesitated going to the body.

"Something wrong?" Doyle asked.

He lifted his hand toward me. He wanted to poke me and there was no denying I would take great pride in knocking Doyle on his ass. But this was not the time or place.

"Just thinking is all," I said.

He eventually went to the body, unwrapping the quilt.

"Who wrapped him up in this?" I asked.

"My deputy's wife. I'm sure she don't want the quilt back."

"I'm sure, too."

First thing that caught my eye were the meaty lumps on Clarke's head. Four to be exact. Four deliberate blows to the head. Then there was the broken nose. Not just broken, obliterated.

"You didn't tell me about this," I said.

"Tell you what?" Doyle raised his voice.

Doyle's belligerence was becoming more apparent by the minute.

"The bruises on this man's head!" I screamed. "Or his nose! Look at his damn nose! When were you going to tell me about the way the body looked?"

"Don't you scream at me." Doyle touched his .357.

"Take your hand off your gun," I barked. "If you use that on me, my bosses would make sure you wouldn't exist anymore."

Doyle thought about it. He slowly removed his hand from the gun, let both hands dangle at his sides.

"Well?" I said after a bit.

"Look," his demeanor changed quickly from hostile to defensive to apologetic. "I-I didn't really think about it. Okay? Hell fire. To me it was another nigger who got drunk, got in a fight, and then he tried to rape that old nigger woman. That's all."

"Just another dead nigger?"

"Yeah," Doyle said, shrugged. "This place is wild, okay. Crazy shit happens all the time. So, I just thought maybe "

"Go ahead, Sheriff," I said. "Finish your sentence. Nobody would care about another dead nigger. Then you found out it was Bobby Clarke. Rich and famous pop singer. You contacted the wife, she contacted the manger, who in turn contacted my bosses at Reliant. I bet you were going to blackmail the family."

"I'm a man of the law," Doyle said in a guilty voice. "I wouldn't do such a disgusting thing to a grieving family."

"Yeah." I flashed a crooked grin. "You wouldn't do that. You know where the fifteen thousand dollars is?"

"What? I-I don't know where any money is."

I read the expression on his face. I couldn't tell, but Doyle's body language suggested he may not have known about the money.

"Okay," I said. "Maybe you didn't know. He was carrying fifteen thousand dollars on him. Loaned to him by my bosses."

"So do you care about this Bobby Clarke?" Doyle asked. "Or are you just here to find the missing fifteen thousand dollars?"

"I was employed to do both. My bosses held Bobby Clarke in high regard, Sheriff. To them, he wasn't just another dead black man."

Doyle didn't know what to say to that. I pulled the rest of the quilt down, saw Clarke's broken hands. All of this points to something else.

The signs are right in his face, and in the Sheriff's face. Doyle was either too dumb to notice or was paid off to forget them.

I covered Bobby Clarke up. I felt uneasy about leaving the dead man there, but I had no say in the matter.

"Look," Doyle said. "I don't really know anything about that missing money."

"I bet Brenda Lee Hayes does."

I FOLLOWED Doyle back to the Sheriff's office. When we entered the threshold, Deputy Hurtz was sitting at Doyle's desk with his feet propped up, eating a peanut butter sandwich and watching television on an 8-inch portable. In a commercial, a woman twirled around in a silhouette until a bright light illuminated her. She sat in a director's chair and told the audience that being a performer and on her feet all day was tiring. Excitedly she continued to say that was the reason she wore Sears pantyhose Legtricity as she gently pulled the fabric. Not only did it make her legs look good, it also made them feel as if she was dancing on air.

Funny, I knew the actress in that commercial. She had been a stripper. Samantha Silk. Strange how life can be.

The *Twilight Zone* came on after that, just at the end when a man discovered that he made a deal with the Devil and he would spend eternity in hell. Hurtz guffawed and nearly choked on his sandwich.

"The hell is going on, Hurtz?" Doyle bellowed as he let the door hit me in the shoulder.

Hurtz leaped out of the chair, dropping his sandwich on the floor.

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry, Sheriff."

"You're going to be if you don't get to your desk."

I stepped inside, closed the door behind Doyle. Hurtz bent down and picked up his peanut butter sandwich just as I walked to Doyle's desk. Hurtz stood quickly. He smiled, and shrugged apologetically, throwing the sandwich in the trash can beside the desk.

"He wants to talk to Miss Hayes." Doyle jabbed an impatient thumb at me.

Hurtz stopped smiling.

"Is that a good idea, Sheriff?"

Doyle hesitated to answer. "No," he said. "It's not a good idea. But I don't have a say in the matter." He moved his eyes towards me. "I don't think it's a good idea, do I?"

"No," I said. "And you have no say so. None, whatsoever." I emphasized *none*.

Hurtz was even more confused than when I first introduced myself an hour before. Hurtz bit his lower lip, tried to work out the situation. He started to speak and stopped several times. Finally, Hurtz decided to make conversation with Doyle confidential. He bent down, kept his eyes steady on me. "Sheriff?" he whispered. "Why ? Why don't you have a say?"

"It don't matter, boy!" Doyle screamed, and Hurtz pulled away quickly. "Just do as I tell you!"

"Okay," Hurtz said. He nodded his head nervously. "Okay, alrighty then."

"Okay?" Doyle asked Hurtz in a threatening tone.

"Okay," Hurtz said, sad that the Sheriff had not only yelled at him once, but twice.

I couldn't help but insert myself in this very funny sketch. "Now that that's all settled. Can I see the woman who you say killed Bobby Clarke?"

Doyle sat behind his desk. Incensed, he said: "Get this peckerwood out of my sight, Deputy."

"Yes, sir." Hurtz angrily pointed down a long hallway that was only halfway painted red that led to another shorter corridor.

Hurtz ran off, almost hopping. I noticed one leg was longer than the other. He nearly walked into a wall and commented to himself that he did. The whole scene was getting on my nerves. I rubbed my face, languishing behind Hurtz with long, deliberate strides. I stopped to look at framed photographs of previous Sheriffs of Rockford County. Strange how they all resembled Doyle. Had his entire family been the law in this area? More than likely. They all had those small dark eyes that made them look shifty.

I heard a Hurtz talking to the woman. She was not in the mood for questioning and she let Hurtz know.

"I don't want to see nobody! You understand?" Brenda screeched.

"Ma'am Sheriff says—"

"I don't care what he says!" Brenda said.

The fifty-year-old woman was shaped like a pear and she'd decided to take her dress and stockings off, hang them across the flat pillow on the bunk. Her hair looked like a rat's nest with three bobby pins clipped to one long strand of greyish-dyed brown hair. She had her hand through the bars of the cell, long jagged finger nearly touching Hurtz blinking eyes. Brenda Lee Hayes continued to aim her rant at Deputy Hurtz.

"Am I not speaking English to you?! I am trying to speak as slowly and as white as I can! And you still can't understand me?"

"Yes, Ma'am, you are. It's just—"

"You can't understand me? Or you can? Which is it, Deputy White bread?"

"I can understand you, but the Sheriff—"

"Fuck the sheriff," she wailed.

"That's enough!" I screamed. "You shut your mouth right now! I'll do the talking from now on, you answer my damn questions!"

"Just who the hell are you—"

"I'm the one who is going to hold you down while the deputy here beats you with a bar of soap in his sock! That's who the hell I am!"

Stunned and frightened, even shocked at how I spoke to her, Brenda retreated to the back of her cell and sat on her bunk.

Confusion crossed Hurtz's face once again

"What-what-what, now-what? I don't think I'm allowed—am I?"

"It's okay, Deputy," I said, taking out a camel from a flattened pack that had been in the front pocket of my windbreaker. I placed the cigarette in my mouth and lit it in a hurry as if someone was about to take it from me. I exhaled blue smoke, watched it circle around the iron bars. "I think we got through to Miss Hayes."

"You still want me to "

"No, Deputy. It's fine. Right, Miss Hayes?"

"Mrs. Hayes, you asshole! I am a married woman, believe it or not!" She folded her arms defiantly.

I nodded and chuckled. "Oh, I believe it and I feel a whole lot of sympathy for that man."

"Hmmp! You should feel it for me," Brenda said. She wore an indignant expression on a face that had seen its share of misery. "What I been through, Jesus Christ hisself weeps for me."

"Maybe so," I moved toward the cell. I pushed the flattened camel pack through the bars, shook out a cigarette. "Maybe so." I offered it to Brenda.

"I don't want one." She spoke like a child that had been reprimanded.

"All I want is to ask you some questions about the trouble last night at the Tahiti," I told her.

"Lord have mercy," Brenda sighed. "I done answered all you white men's questions. What more do you want me to say?"

"Mrs. Hayes, could you please tell me what happened? From the start?"

Brenda considered it. "I told him," she said calmly, bobbed her head once to Hurtz.

"Tell me," I urged. "Please." I held my hand out to Hurtz. "Give me the key, Deputy."

"Sheriff Doyle ain't going to like that—" He stopped talking, realized that statement wouldn't matter at all to me. "This one goes to her cell." He took the keys from his gun belt and handed it over with a sad, dopey smile. He picked out a long skinny rusted key. The key went in rough, but the lock popped open immediately. I opened the cell door and Brenda's eyes grew bigger. Nervously, she looked for an escape route, and when she didn't see one, she gasped and began to pray.

"No, no." I stood at the cell door, held up my hands. "I'm just coming in to talk. I swear. I'm not going to hurt you. Deputy Hurtz will stay to make sure."

"That ain't much assurance, Mister Cole," her voice trembled.

"No," I shrugged. "I suppose it's not. You'll have to trust me."

"What you said earlier—"

"Just just forget what I said, Brenda. No one is going to hurt you. I was trying to get you to see who was boss. Look, I only want to get to the bottom of this." I waited for her to say something else. She didn't. "Well. Can I come inside?"

"Okay," she finally said.

I walked in, slowly, not to spook Brenda. I stood in front of her. We glared at each other.

"Can I sit?"

"Yeah," she said after assessing the situation.

I sat beside her on the cot, making sure there was enough space between us. I took a drag from my cigarette, waiting to speak.

"What happened that night, Mrs. Hayes?"

"Just what I told the sheriff."

"Can you tell me—from the beginning?"

"Anybody ever tell you you're a pain in the tush?"

I chuckled. "More times than I can count."

Brenda sighed. "I'll take one of them Camels."

I took the pack out of my jacket pocket, handed it to Brenda. She took a cigarette, gave the pack back. She placed the cigarette in between her lips and I lit it with my old heavy grey lighter. Deeply drawing in the smoke, she held her breath, then exhaled.

"I haven't had one of these in two years," she said. "I thought I was done with them. Okay," she paused. "I'll tell the story again. Seeing as I'll be telling it the rest of my life."

"Yeah," I said. "I think you will be. Was that night the first time out saw him at the motel?"

"No," Brenda said. "He'd come in—about every few months."

"With the same woman?"

"Lord, no. Usually he'd come in with a white woman."

"Same white woman?"

"No," she laughed. "That man had a different white woman every time. Once or twice he had a black girl, but they were light-skinned."

"Can you describe her?"

"She was tall for a woman. Light-skinned black woman. Wearing a black dress. Lord, she was dressed in all black. Had the darkest eyes I'd ever seen. Something about her face "

"Like what?"

"You gonna say I'm crazy, but I don't care. Her face kept changing. As God as my witness, Mr. Cole. Her face was different every time I looked at her. Sometimes she had high cheekbones and full lips. Sometimes she had thin lips and a cleft chin I don't know what weird thing was going on "

She fell silent for a bit, thinking of what she described to me. I waited until she was ready. Her eyes were darting back and forth while she smoked her cigarette. I wasn't sure if I believed her.

"Your boss doesn't practice the state laws of unmarried couples staying together?"

"It is the policy of the motel that if paying customers are adults, it is their business. Besides, he always signs the registry as Mister and Mrs. Smith."

"How original," I said.

"I don't care what name they put down as long as they got the money for the room," Brenda said.

"Did you know he was Bobby Clarke, the pop singer?"

"At first I didn't recognize him. I don't listen to that mess, Mr. Cole. I listen to Gospel music. Yes," Brenda took a drag of her cigarette. "I knew who he was. I've seen him perform at our local church when he was younger. I could see the effect he had on the audience, especially the females, and I didn't care for it. But he had a smooth voice. I liked that. Almost a caring voice. Just the way I imagined a messenger of God would sound. I stopped caring about his music when he sang for the devil."

"Contrary to your line of work," I told her.

"I just rent rooms, Mr. Cole. That's all. I don't tell people to drink or have relations."

"How was he as a customer?"

"Fine. Up to last night. When he came in, I could see he left the woman outside by the pool, he always left his women by the pool. He came in with a different swagger."

"Different how?" I asked.

"Mr. Cole, Bobby Clarke normally will say: 'Hello, miss. May I have a room for my wife and me?' Different last night. He came in and immediately banged his fist on the desk and screamed: 'Hey! Get your ass out here so I can get a damn room!'"

I finished my cigarette, stubbed it out on the concrete floor.

"So he was aggressive?"

"And some," Brenda said. "Plus, his eyes didn't look right. He was lookin' at me, but lookin' through me. He must've seen some demons or somethin'. He was all jittery and jumping at every little bit of noise. At one point he put his hands over his ears and told me to stop hollerin'. Lord have mercy. I gave him his key in a hurry! Twenty minutes later, or less, he came storming back in, banging on my office door, screaming: 'Where is she? Where's that bitch?!' I told him I didn't know who in blazes he was talking about. Scared the life out of me! Lord have mercy." Brenda placed a hand over her sagging breasts, caught her breath. She continued: "I wouldn't open the office door. I kept the chain on. I looked out the parted door. God almighty, he was all messed up."

"He got even angrier when you wouldn't open the door?"

"That man was crazy! He kicked in my door! He was wearin' nothing but a sports jacket and his socks!" Brenda glanced at the concrete floor, a little disturbed. "His well his thing was stickin' out at me. Lord have mercy!"

"Then what happened, Mrs. Hayes?"

"He came at me like a wild man. Turned my desk over. I ran and got the .22 and plugged him! Twice! He fell on his knees, said: 'Lady, you shot me'. There he died right in front of me."

I stood. Took a few steps and stopped. I turned to face Brenda Lee Hayes.

"Mrs. Hayes?"

"Yes, Mr. Cole?"

"You say a barefoot man kicked in your door?"

She thought about it.

"No," she said. "Mhmm. He used his shoulder. Yes. That's what it was. I was kinda confused, Mr. Cole. Been a tryin' night."

"I see," I said.

"When do I get out of here?"

"Oh," I smirked. "I don't know."

"You ain't a D.A. or a cop?"

"No, ma'am," I said. "Just a guy with a curious mind."

I walked out of the cell, closed the door behind me. As I approached Hurtz I heard Brenda Lee Hayes yell at me., "You are a sorry son of a bitch!"

I turned to her. And said, "Yeah. So I've been told."

DOYLE SAT BEHIND HIS DESK, his feet propped up, laughing so hard he almost fell out of his chair. His shiny black boots had yellow roses plastered all around except for the heels. Two men in tight-fitting business suits sat in low-back wooden chairs, facing Doyle. One man was very short, had a crew cut on a very square head that sat on a very square body. The other man was tall, light-haired, and bespectacled. He was very thin, as if his body wasn't flesh and bone, but made up of ribbon or string. When Hurtz and I ambled into the office, all three men were laughing, drinking coffee out of dirty mugs.

"Hey." Doyle shifted his eyes to me. "You get what you needed from Brenda Lee Hayes?"

"I got to share a cigarette with her," I said.

"You talked to my client?" The square-faced man asked.

"No one else in the jailhouse. Mrs. Hayes is your client, Mr.—?"

"Kohl," the square-faced man said. "Alan Kohl. Yes, she is. Who are you?"

"The man who refuses to tell you who I am," I said.

"You should tell him who you are," the tall man said.

The tall man and I locked eyes. After the brief staredown, I asked: "Why is that?"

Doyle laughed. "This is Kurt Humner. Show Dick Cole your credentials, Kurt."

Humner shot Doyle a dissatisfied glance and retrieved a black wallet. He flashed a photostat of a very sour man and, more importantly, the FBI stamp.

"Makes sense," I said. Even though it really didn't make sense, but I was willing to go along with it. "Good to meet you both."

"Why are you questioning my client, Mr. Cole?" Kohl directed the question like he was throwing knives at me. His hands automatically clutched his hips and his facial expressions slipped into the demeanor of a rabid Orangutan.

I laughed, shook my head.

"Why is the question funny?" Kohl said.

"I just realized we have the same last name. I'm sure they are spelled differently because "

"Because why, Mr. Cole? I'm Jewish?"

"Yeah," I prodded. That's what I'm really good at. Is getting under people's skin. And if pointing out the differences in color or race or sex needles them, then good. I've done my job. It needed Kohl something awful. I could tell.

"Let's change the subject," I said.

"Yes. Let's," Kohl snarled.

I smiled graciously. "Mrs. Hayes is your client now, huh?"

"She's going to be," Kohl said.

"So she is or she isn't, Mr. Kohl?"

"She will be," he snapped.

"I don't think that can happen," I said.

Kohl unraveled a white wrapper from a stick of gum that had melted days ago, became hard, and melted again from the heat of the

new day. He tore the stringy gum from the wrapper with his teeth and unceremoniously chewed with quite a bit of fierceness.

"And why is that?"

I chuckled, wagging a finger.

"You're putting me on," I said, glanced at everyone else in the room, chuckled again. "He's putting me on. He's razzing me. I know it."

"Hey!" Kohl screamed at me. The gum shot out of his mouth and hit Doyle's desk, stuck to the corner like slime. He bared all his little dingy teeth. "I'm no clown, asshole!"

He took two steps toward me and I met up with him, his forehead touching my chin.

"The hell you aren't!" I rebutted.

Humner placed his hand on Kohl's chest and Kohl smacked it away. I felt inclined to meet him halfway. I had an idea Kohl had bullied his way through life. Ever since that day a bigger boy had beat him to a pulp and Kohl decided he would never again be the victim.

Doyle rose from his chair quickly to get in the middle. Hurtz ran in the direction of his desk with a whole lot of nervous energy. Doyle held both of us at arm's length, announcing: "Knock it off, you two! You're in my building!"

"So what?!" Kohl said.

"So behave yourself!" Doyle said.

Things calmed down. Kohl meandered to the left, pacing, and I drifted a few feet away with a smirk on my face. I got to him and I reveled in the experience. Pure bliss.

In a level voice, Doyle said, "Why can't he represent Mrs. Hayes?"

"He's Bobby Clarke's manager, that's why." I sighed.

"You didn't mention that, Mr. Kohl," Doyle said.

Kohl's attitude changed. He forced a smile through those tightly closed dingy teeth.

"It shouldn't matter, should it, Sheriff Doyle?"

"I'm not an expert in these matters," Doyle said. "But I'm pretty sure it's not ethical for a lawyer to represent someone who is accused of killing a former client of said lawyer."

"Conflict of interest," I chimed in.

Humner intervened. "Well, I am from a federal agency and I say it's okay."

"You're in my county, Mr. Humner," Doyle said. His smile had vanished just as his jovial, country bumpkin act had. Doyle lifted his chin, looking at Humner coolly. He stood with legs apart, and his hand slowly moved to the butt of that .357. "You're in my office. I hope I don't need to remind you."

"Sheriff," Kohl pleaded with Doyle. "It's inherent we speak with Mrs. Hayes."

"You get a judge to say it's okay. Then I'll let you fellas talk to her."

"I don't need a judge to tell me I can talk to someone," Humner said. "I'm a Fed."

"Are you?" I said. "A Fed?" Doubt had started to creep in the second he showed me that photostat. The FBI emblem looked a little off-center.

"Uhhh," Hurtz chimed in. He was walking in a circle, stopping, then looking out the window. "Oh gosh! Oh, gosh! Uhhh you're not going to like this!"

"What, Deputy?" Doyle fired back. "What am I not going to like?"

"Not you, Sheriff," Hurtz said. "Mr. Cole."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"That fella you gave a ride?"

"Yeah."

"He just stole your car, and a white Ford Zephyr is chasing him."

HURTZ DROVE like a madman in the Crown Victoria. He raced around Main Street and all side streets trying to catch Davis Goode, the man who stole my Javelin. Hurtz screamed, laughed wildly as the tires of the police car kicked up dirt and dust. I dug my nails into the dashboard and held on for dear life. We chased Goode all the way out on the man highway, headed south. He was gone. The Javelin had outrun Hurtz and his Crown Victoria. Hurtz didn't give up though. Thirty minutes later we found my car. The direction the man had taken looked like he was going to Odarko. We entered a rest stop area.

There it was. My Javelin parked in a semi-circle, tire tracks had formed a question mark. The bumper of the car had smashed into the phone booth, cracked the glass around it. The door on the driver's side was wide open and it looked like footprints in the dirt had chased another set of footprints.

The phone was off the hook, dangling by the cord. I walked to the phone booth, stepped inside. I picked up the receiver and listened. A woman was on the other end.

"Hello? Jerry? Are you all right?"

"Jerry had to leave," I said.

"Who is this?" the woman demanded.

I flipped the question to her "Who is this?"

"What have you done to Jerry?"

"Look, I'm a passerby. I don't know a Jerry—"

"Bullshit! If you've harmed Jerry—I know you work for Kurt "

"Kurt? Kurt Humner?"

She stopped speaking. Uneasy breathing filled my ears.

"You're playing games with me," she said after a while. "I recognize your voice. I know who this is. You wouldn't hire anyone to do your dirty work."

I waited for her to answer. She wasn't forthcoming. Her breathing was inconsistent. At times I thought she was having an orgasm. I wanted to keep the conversation going, so I jumped right in.

"I wouldn't?" No answer; I repeated the question. "I wouldn't, huh?"

"No," she extended the pronunciation of the O, followed by a sharp inhale and exhale. "You're the type who wants to do things right. You'll do them yourself."

"Like kill someone?"

The woman fell silent again. Then she said: "You've done it before."

"Oh. Is that right?"

"You didn't think I knew about Tom and Viv, did you?"

"You don't," I played along.

"Oh, but I do, Mister. I know a lot about you. I know about you and General Liam."

"Is there a way we can meet and discuss this?"

"What?"

The woman was rattled. I could hear it in her voice. I had this odd feeling that I knew that voice. It was pristine, New England accent. The woman hurried when she spoke.

"Can we meet somewhere?" I said.

"Why would we meet? I told you I didn't want to continue the affair —" The woman broke off, swallowed hard. "Oh God. Who is this? You aren't—?" Two clicks and the line went dead.

I scoffed, snarled at the receiver, and pulled it away from my ears.

"Who was that?" Hurtz asked.

"A woman," I said.

Hurtz thought about his next question carefully. "She has something to do with all this?"

"What do you think 'all this' is?" I asked him.

Hurtz thought about it, rubbed his thin jawline.

"Looks like a kidnapping. Or a forceful rousting."

"Looks that way to me too," I told him. "I don't know what's going on, but she just about spilled her guts about what she knew. I spooked her. She thought she was talking to a man she was having or had an affair with."

"What the hay?" Hurtz made a face. "Man, am I confused."

"Makes two of us, Deputy," I said. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

We made it back to the station. The sheriff was alone. Kohl and Humner were gone. Doyle was distraught. He didn't say a word, he just glared at us. Hurt tried to get him to talk, but he wouldn't budge.

"Sheriff?" Hurtz bent down and looked Doyle over. "You all right?"

Doyle said, "I kept hearing her weeping."

"Who?" I asked.

"This this woman walking around in the parking lot," Doyle said. "She—she was wailing screaming weeping so loud, I thought my eardrums would explode I went to help her she-she disappeared just vanished "

Suddenly, Hurtz confusion left him and a bright idea entered his midget mind.

He ran down the hallway toward the cells. I heard a scream.

"She's dead!" Hurtz announced. "She's dead! She's dead! She's dead!" He staggered back into the office, slamming into walls, left to right. He had a pained look on his face, tears were trickling down his red face. "She's dead."

I rushed past him to the cells.

There she was, Brenda Lee Hayes, hanging by her pantyhose from the small light fixture in the ceiling.

Yes, she was dead.

FROM THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OCCULT
ARTIFACTS
BY RUSSEL DE'BLANC

(Copyright 1969)

THE OBJECT

Color: Black

5 x 5 x 12 inches

Weight: 7 ounces.

Made of Unknown material—sometimes described as made of granite, other times silk or unknown fabric.

THE OBJECT, often referred to as the Obelisk, was discovered in 1935 by Charles Shandt in Egypt during an exploration of the Tomb of Orasis, one of many of spellbinding Doctors that served King Tutankhamun, a pharaoh that ruled 1332-1323 BC. Discovering the purpose of the Obelisk became Shandt's lifelong obsession. In his research that took him all over the world, several of these statues would pop up in the strangest areas: Nigeria, Paris, Atlanta, Georgia, Ukraine, and Thailand.

Shandt wrote in his diaries that many people who found the statue had seen bright lights in the sky and the object fall to the ground. Upon touching the Obelisk, they immediately lose or discover time gaps, or chronological events of their lives have no order, often repeating key

moments several times before moving on. A priest in Paris told Shandt that he would often find himself making tea for a young lady he eventually impregnated and resulted in his dismissal from the church. This young lady became his wife, but he kept reliving that moment where he made her tea and a meal, next finding himself caring for their toddler, and jumping back to the tea and meal, then to the point of seeing his wife bedridden, dying of cancer, back to the tea and meal, and forward to taking his son to school, back to the tea and meal, forward to his wife and he listening to their son act on a radio program.

Also, many people said the Obelisk was a living, breathing artifact, witnessing the Object's material expand and deflate as if it had lungs. Sometimes people heard heartbeats when all was quiet, and others reported hearing the moaning or crying of a woman who was seen roaming in the night, her wailing waking everyone, as was written by a farmer in Atlanta. Other times, those who have the statue in their possession used the Obelisk for wish fulfillment, such as the case in Thailand. A woman wished her mother to be alive. Walking through the village she saw a skeletal figure oozing flesh standing among crowds. This skeletal figure at first wasn't noticed by anyone, but there was a complaint of foul odor, "something dead." Arriving home, the woman saw the skeletal figure sitting at the kitchen table, feeding the woman's newborn child.

In Ukraine, money was given to a man who lived on the streets. With the newly acquired profits, he purchased a small cottage. He also purchased seeds and planted them. Instead of vegetables growing in his garden, months later body parts sprouted as plants. A week later, the man was arrested for the robbery and gruesome murder of the family who took him in when he arrived in that Ukrainian town.

The Object may also create Doppelgangers, or doubles, of those who possess the statue.

I HAVE a weird story to relate to you. It ties into the story I've been telling. Only this happened three years ago. Nineteen seventy-three, I believe was the year. Everyone was celebrating the Miami Dolphins going 17-0 and winning the Super Bowl over the Washington Redskins. Who knew in Odarko, Oklahoma, there would be that many Dolphins fans? Or just people hopping on the bandwagon, I guess. At the office, banners were hung congratulating the team. But that's not the point of this story. Oh, no, no. You see, a name has popped up in conversation recently in connection to the case of Bobby Clarke. That's why I remember this story and that son of a bitch Stanley Kurtzman.

Carole raised her head and quickly removed her fingers from the Smith Corona electric typewriter. She smiled mischievously at me and leaned back in her chair. She stretched her arms high above her head. The white fabric of her blouse stretched and caressed her ample breasts, giving me a nice view of her erect nipples. She yawned and crossed her legs. Her maroon-colored skirt rode up to let me see her lacy stocking tops.

That was a signal to let me know her boyfriend was back at college and I could come visit Carole anytime. I smiled. Carole smiled. Message

was received loud and clear. I placed a finger over his lips. That was confirmation I would be over later that night.

"You don't want to go in there," she said. Strands from her short blonde hair weaved left, then right. "A fistfight is about to ensue." Her head bobbed as a high-pitched giggle tore from her larynx. "Arnold and Bill are having a discussion."

"They owe me a check," I said. "Discussion or not, I'm getting paid. Leo in there?"

"Of course," Carole said. "It's his office. He's the one you hear pleading for everyone to calm down."

I shrugged. "Leo is always the middle man, eh?"

"He's a tough guy, that's for sure." Carole giggled.

"Thanks, Carole," I tapped her desk with a knuckle and headed toward the office.

"I'm having meatloaf tonight," her voice sailed toward my ears. Definitely a song from a siren.

"Better make a couple," I said. "I plan on eating all night."

I heard Carole cackle as I sauntered down the hallway past several men and women bustling around, talking in code to each other or shouting commands, trying to avoid colliding with each other in a catastrophic manner suited for a 1940s screwball comedy film.

I opened the office door and Leo, a very short man, was in between two very tall, fat men. Their bellies were suffocating him. Leo desperately tried to free himself and still keep the men apart.

Arnold Capp was the chief accountant for Reliant and Bill Stevens was the executive making deals to buy companies in the best interest of the corporation. Neither man could stand the other. There were always arguments between the two at board meetings. Both men liked trouble a little too much, and in the past two years since Reliant took over

employing me, I have had to save their asses almost as much as Jesus has saved souls.

"You lost that money!" Capp screamed.

"Gentlemen, please—" Leo had his hands on both men's bellies, pushing them away from him and trying to keep them from attacking each other. He wasn't achieving either goal.

"Ohhh, that's rich, buddy-boy!" Stevens countered.

Again, verbally and physically, Leo attempted to break up the fight. "Gentlemen, please, no fighting in my office—"

Stevens continued: "I remember a time when you stopped at rest area and left your car unlocked! That money went missing as well!"

"At least I don't see a whore twice a week!"

"Don't call her a whore! And that might do you some good instead of sticking that pitiful hot dog in that whale of a wife of yours—"

"Okay, okay, fellas," I laughed as I inserted myself between Capp and Stevens, squeezing Leo out of the circle. "Enough of this crap—"

Capp was the one who threw the punch that connected with my chin. I fell backwards onto the end table by the sofa and landed hard on my left side. I felt the top of my flask open and gin soaked my shirt and jacket. My .38 and some shells fell from my inside jacket. They rolled on the carpeted floor just as Carole entered. One shell rolled under her left heel, and down she went, squealing and landing on her back.

Leo was caught between helping Carole and helping me. Instead, Leo stood there with arms flailing, screeching: "Oh my God, Oh my God!" Neither Capp nor Stevens came to my aide, which was only fitting, because I would've decked both of them if they touched me. They shoved each other as they ran to Carole. She was up in the air, legs swinging, and her hands were fighting to keep her skirt down. Everyone in the office got a good view of black panties and tan stockings attached to a black garter belt.

I got up slowly. I sat on the end table, felt my aching chin with a hand. I retrieved my flask, realized there was still gin left, and took three big gulps of it. I decided to move myself to the sofa. Still reeling from the punch, I barely kept myself upright. I lay on the sofa and watched the two buffoons help Carole up and blame each other for the situation. After a few minutes of the show, I grew tired of the noise. So I raised my voice.

"Everyone find a damn seat and shut the hell up!"

Leo was shaking in his shoes. He rushed off to sit behind his desk. Capp and Stevens passed shocked glances, shrugged and left a wobbly Carole standing by herself. She turned about-face and sashayed out of the office without saying a word. Capp and Stevens found a chair each and parked their ample rear ends simultaneously.

"Leo?" My voice sheared through the noise in the hallway. He stood, caught his balance and walked over to shut the office door. Immediately the noise was muzzled.

"Yes?" Leo quivered.

I went back to the end table but didn't sit. I pointed to Capp and Stevens. "What's all this crap about?"

"Seems someone lost some money," Leo said, matter-of-factly.

"He lost the money!" Capp jabbed his thumb at Stevens.

"Don't start—" Stevens tried to say but I interrupted.

"Both of you shut up!"

The room fell silent.

"Continue, Leo," I said.

"Well, I hate to point a finger, but truth of the matter is, Bill went to the Safari lounge."

"As he always does," Capp said.

"Shut it," I demanded.

"Bill has a, well, female friend he sees from time to time, that is employed there."

Stevens squirmed in his chair. His eyes moved to the floor.

"She's a dancer there," I said.

"Yes," Leo cleared his throat.

I sighed heavily.

"He went to her dressing room, and woke up hours later on Fulton Boulevard. Shep called me at two in the morning to come pick up Bill, minus the money he had on him, and most of his clothes."

I chuckled and nodded. "You got rolled, eh, Stevens?"

Large black eyes became tiny slits. "It appears so, Dick." He wasn't emphasizing my first name. Nor was he referring to me being a private investigator. "Excuse me, Private Dick."

"That's my job, smart guy," I took out a smashed pack of Camel cigarettes from the breast pocket of my jacket and placed a bent cigarette in my mouth. "Lately," I struck a match on the side of the end table and lit the cigarette. I took a long drag, exhaled, then said, "More and more Leo has been calling me in to mop up you idiots' messes."

"See here!" Capp turned to me in a threatening manner.

"Okay Screw you guys. I've been around a lot of dummies in my time—look, Leo. Nothing against you, but when Old Man Spiff ran Odarko, he never employed clowns like this unless he needed fall guys —"

A bell went off in my head. Yeah. Maybe that was the situation then, I thought.

"I'm sorry," I chuckled. "Been working a lot lately, fellas. This kind of thing. Well it can happen to anyone. Okay. I'll look into this matter."

"Yah," Stevens shrugged. "I've heard it happening to a few guys in my time."

"I suppose it's thriftless to sit and blame Bill here," Leo said. He gave Capp a pleading glance.

Capp rolled his eyes. "I suppose we shouldn't throw stones. Bill he's a good man to have around."

"Thank you, Arnold," Stevens laughed heartily.

"I need to talk to Leo about my pay," I said. "Would you two give us a minute?"

"Of course," Capp stood. "I have business elsewhere in the building."

"Yah." Stevens rocked himself out of the chair. "No problem. I gotta go to the john, anyway." He chuckled and followed Capp out of the office, closing the door behind him.

I took one last drag from my cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray on the end table.

Leo opened his desk drawer and took out a large black checkbook. "We owe you two hundred and ten dollars, don't we?" Leo began writing on a check.

"Nope," I said.

Leo stopped writing, placing his gold-plated pen beside the large black checkbook. He looked at me sideways. "I'm sorry?"

"Five hundred and seventy-five dollars, Leo. My retainer for this job and the blackmail job I did for Thomas Seaclyff manufacturer employee. But I also want another five hundred as a finder's fee."

"Dick," Leo gasped, "That's highway robbery."

"It's fair. How much damn money did that jackass lose?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars." Leo made a painful face when he said that.

"I think there might be another angle," I said, carefully choosing my words.

"Oh. Really?"

"I'm not going to tell you until I have concrete evidence. Just a hunch."

Leo thought about it as he placed a hand on his oval-shaped chin.

"All right," he said.

"Why was Stevens carrying that much cash on him?"

"He was going to a business meeting."

"At the Safari?"

"Yes. That's where the client wanted to meet," Leo said.

"And who's the client?"

"Stanley Kurtzman."

I raised an eyebrow. "Stanley Kurtzman?"

"Yes. Why?" A little bit of vibrato hit Leo's voice and lines of worry stretched his face.

"Stanley Kurtzman has been known to be involved in some, shall we say, shaky deals." I smiled. "He sort of owns a junkyard off route 19."

"Sort of?" Leo asked.

"Co-owned by some fellas who wouldn't like the cops to nose around in their affairs."

"He told Bill he owns gentlemen's clubs in Tulsa."

"He wanted to build one in Odarko?"

"Yes," Leo started to get defensive and I stymied the huffiness by holding up a hand. Leo took a moment to calm down.

"How many gentlemen's clubs are there in Oklahoma, Leo?"

He shrugged, calculated in his head. "Eight. Seven in Tulsa, one in Clover, just outside the Odarko county line."

"Exactly. All seven clubs are owned by Archie Tippit."

"Mob related?"

"You didn't know?"

"No," Leo was infuriated.

"What was the dancer's name?"

"Uhhh " Leo rifled through a mound of paperwork the checkbook sat on. His skinny, fragile fingers worked too fast to find the slip of paper with a name scrawled on it. He smiled, trumpeting joyously when he found it. "Here we go. Ahh my lord. My handwriting is awful. Samantha Silk. Yes. Samantha Silk."

I nodded. "Easy to remember."

"I hear she's remarkable to look at as well."

"Uh-huh," I chuckled. "I'm sure she is. But is she worth fifteen thousand dollars?"

AJAX USED to work the door at the Safari to help fund plays he put on at the theatre. Among various other criminal activities, Ajax sold stolen goods. He was called often to clean up crime scenes for the police and others who needed dead bodies removed. Mafia boss Anthony Roulette was Ajax's main employer.

Working the door at the Safari helped me tremendously on this case. Ajax could get me access without a lot of trouble. Only thing is I had to split my fee. That's why I negotiated with Leo.

He met Ajax behind the Safari. Tall, cool, wearing Jackie-O sunglasses, he was smoking a cigarette in the shadows. Ajax was always happy to see his best friend, no matter what the situation was. His cocoa butter skin and large brown eyes made Ajax a hit with females of all races. His intimate life was just as messy as my professional life.

"Ready to rock this joint?" Ajax laughed as he embraced me.

I pulled away momentarily, smiled, and said: "Rock it so hard they'll think an Atom bomb fell."

The door swung open and blazing, screeching saxophone assaulted their ears. In front of the curtains was a sleek golden-haired lioness wearing nothing but black stockings. She was arched back, hips gyrating, swinging 38 DDs as if she was smacking each member of the

audience one by one. Ajax and I stood at the end of the stage, hidden by the curtain, mesmerized by the indecent dance.

Tony Jaffe stood a few feet away, on the other side of the small stage, watching Samantha Silk perform. He wore a lascivious grin and had nefarious intent in his eyes. Samantha turned away from the audience and faced Tony. She smiled at him, caressed her left breast, and tweaked her nipple. Ajax and I exchanged knowing glances.

Jaffe was a business manager for a lot of performers. Not just dancers, but musical groups and even one or two low-grade theatre actors. Ajax had met with him before to get representation for himself and the theatre group. Ajax got a bad vibe and left without a deal. Might have been my influence. I had a few run-ins with Jaffe when a personal assistant robbed a promoter of cash that was actually a loan from Reliant so that the promoter wouldn't go bankrupt.

"I think we should watch those two," Ajax whispered. I nodded in agreement.

When the performance was over, Jaffe met Samantha, kissing her as he slung a robe around her. She finished covering her naked body with the robe, tied the sash, and followed Jaffe to the dressing room.

A comedian took the stage. Cheers and high-pitched whistles ensued. The audience was so excited a person would think Martin and Lewis had reunited.

"What do we do now?" Ajax asked.

"Let's go talk to them."

"Talk to who?" a voice said from the stage. Loud clapping and laughter nearly drowned out the man's voice. We turned and saw Crawford Jennings standing there, chomping on an unlit cigar. His three-piece suit was too snug for his rotund body, the seams straining.

Jennings owned the Safari. Jennings was a well-connected man. The outfit in Tulsa loved Jennings because he was able to take over clubs

and make a lot of money in a short time. The Safari was his prize possession. His baby. Free and clear, Jennings paid the least tribute to the outfit of all the businesses in Oklahoma. For a time he tried to muscle in on Odarko and Darktown. That didn't work out so well for him. The scar above his left eye could attest to that and his hatred of everyone from that region burned bright every time he laid eyes on me.

Jennings was backed by two very large black men in beachwear and straw hats. Ajax had known Marvin and Tuppy since they were kids. Tuppy used to live next door and Marvin, well, Marvin was the school bully. Marvin, like most boys in Darktown, had a thing for Celeste, Ajax's sister. She didn't care much for Marvin. He obsessed over her. To get him to understand that, Ajax and another friend threw Marvin in a sack, hung him upside from a tree, and beat him with sticks.

He understood after that. He never forgot the beating or the humiliation. He never let Ajax forget either. He shot the friend in the head when they were twelve. Ajax barely got away.

"What brings you boys here?" Jennings asked.

"Looking for some money," I said.

"Money," Jennings said. "This ain't the unemployment office."

"Hey, Marvin," Ajax chuckled. "I gotta sack I'd like to introduce you to."

"Mother fucker," Marvin snarled.

Tuppy and Marvin were chomping at the ends to discard us. They didn't wait for a signal. Both men silently started for us, but Jennings stopped them.

He said to Ajax: "Hey, I tried watching one of those plays you put on for free at the park."

"Oh, yeah," Ajax smiled hugely. He'd take a compliment from Hitler himself. "You liked it?"

"No," Jennings said deadpan. Then laughed and shook his head. "I couldn't understand what was going on!"

Tuppy and Marvin laughed. Ajax was smoldering. The embarrassment rose up to his stone face.

"I'm a little confused," I said. "All the times you and your flunkies have been behind bars, you've never seen a play? Well, that's okay, Ajax. Those three wouldn't know culture if it bit them on the ass oops in Jennings' case, bit him on the dick."

Oh, he was furious. I'm one of the few people who knew he had V.D. How I knew is an exchange of information from his doctor for not telling authorities the doctor used to perform abortions out of his house.

"Get the fuck outta my establishment!"

"Not until I find out what happened to that money," I said.

"Ohhhhh," Jennings nodded. "You're talking about one of those whipping boys from Reliant who got rolled. Oh, yes. That dancer is gone. She took off." Jennings laughed and his cronies followed. He stopped laughing and they were silenced, as if he'd removed the needle from a record.

"I don't believe that for a second," I told him. "I think you have the money. You told Samantha Silk to roll him."

"You're not my priest and I ain't confessin'." Jennings spat on the floor. "If anything I think your victim is in on it."

"What makes you think that?" I asked. "You heard something?"

"C'mon, Cole! It's so obvious. You've worked for insurance companies. I know you have because I looked you up. Leo might be a sucker, but you ain't. The one she supposedly rolled, he was askin' about this kind of business. Him and that Kurtzman jackoff."

"I think you know more than you're saying."

"I think you need to talk to Samantha Silk."

A stagehand in a Rolling Stones T-shirt and jeans with bottoms dragging across the floor walked by with a transistor radio on. A newscaster with a scratchy, Baptist preacher voice was excited about a bank robbery in Saulsberry.

"A series of bank robberies have occurred in the past month," the newscaster took a quick breath. "The Savings and Loans in North Cumberland was held up last Wednesday. Four persons in a grey Ford Van also held up two other banks, Palisade Trust in Campbell County and BBT in Holston. In this rash of armed robberies, the suspects got away with amounts upward of three thousand to five thousand dollars each time. If you have any information—"

Jennings took the radio from the longhaired man.

"Hey! That's my shit!" the man protested.

Jennings smashed the frail electronic against the wall and it broke into six different pieces. The voice immediately stopped talking and a long wail followed by static noise invaded our ears. Jennings gave the handle back to the stagehand.

"Now your shit's fucked up," he told the longhaired man and stormed out of the building.

We needed to find Samantha Silk, so we headed to the dressing rooms located downstairs in a building that used to be a storage area when the place was a restaurant. I remembered it was the only Chinese restaurant within fifty miles, and when it closed up it made me sad as hell. They had the best sweet and sour chicken. I got hooked on Chinese food living in Baltimore, one of the few good memories I have of the city. The rest are just cardboard that I'd love to set on fire with a blow torch.

Ajax told me security was scarce just before the second act took the stage. We found four young, beautiful dancers getting ready for their act. One Latina girl was busy changing into a skimpy white chemise

and stay-up black stockings. A taller blonde girl was completely nude trying to decide which bra and stockings and garter belt to wear with a nighty. She asked the cocoa-skinned lady next to her who was already dressed in a black top hat and tuxedo jacket, white sheer blouse, bowtie and tan leotard, which comes with a whip.

It was the dark-haired slender woman in black stockings and black bra and no panties that saw Ajax and I skulking around the door.

"Oh! You two must be the new security," she said in an Okie accent. She had a .32 snub nose in her hand.

"Actually, we're here to talk to Samantha Silk," I said. "Is she around?"

"Hmmp!" The black girl scoffed. "Don't none of us see that tramp around here. She doesn't do anything without her manager being present."

"She eat and sleep him," the Latina girl said. The other girls laughed. The blonde corrected her by saying, "She doesn't eat or sleep without his say so." The Latina girl looked miffed. "Yes," she threw her hands on her hips. "That's what I say!"

"Is that a part of the act?" Ajax nodded at the dark-haired beauty sliding the .32 into her stocking top.

She laughed raucously. "Of course! Life is all a stage." She winked and jutted her large firm breasts at Ajax.

"I dig it," he chuckled. "Any of you girls know where we can find Samantha Silk?"

The black girl spoke up, not too happy someone asked for her. "Jesus! Every guy that shuffles through this damn club asks for that hoe! Yeah, I know where she lives."

"You don't seem happy with Samantha," I said.

"She stole Crystal's roster lead," the blonde said.

"I was number one before that bitch showed. Then she stole my damn manager!"

"How'd she do that?" I asked.

Crystal picked up an ink pen and jotted an address down on an envelope. "How do you think? She put those 38 double-Ds in his mouth, that's how!"

I showed them a newspaper clipping of Bill Stevens. He was getting an award for helping to raise money for a woman's shelter.

"Ever see Samantha Silk with this man?" I asked.

The other three girls shook their heads. But Crystal laughed out loud, praised whoever was in the ceiling or sky.

"Lord Jesus! Bill Stevens! I've seen him with her, yep. I've even gone out with Bill. He's a nice man until he realizes you ain't giving up anything for those dinners."

"He's been with Samantha? Here?" Ajax asked.

"Yeah," Crystal laughed again. "I went to borrow something from her. I saw him in her dressing room trying on her outfit one day. They were having a good time. I figure he was drunk. Passed out on top of her not long after that."

She handed the envelope to Ajax. He read it in silence, looked over at me, and said: "Longhorn apartments."

"Hmm that's only four minutes away."

Ajax shrugged. "Let's ride, my man."

Samantha Silk answered the door dressed in a blouse, slacks, no shoes, and no bra, for that matter. She was polite, gracious, and very southern. Charm oozed out her fingertips and she knew she could easily wrap Ajax and me around those delicate ivory fingers.

She led us to her small living room loaded with knick-knacks on corner shelves and stuffed animals on a loveseat. She told us to clear them aside and have a seat. She went to the kitchen and returned a minute later with two glasses of iced tea. She sat in a rocker across from us.

"I saw you fellas earlier at the club." Samantha crossed her legs. "I'm sorry I didn't get to say hello. I usually greet my fans but I was in a hurry."

"That's fine," I said. "We just have a few questions."

"About my act?" she said brightly.

"Not exactly," Ajax smiled hugely. As a matter of fact, Ajax couldn't stop smiling if he wanted to. "Our client seems to have lost some money. We were hoping you could help us retrace his movements."

"Oh my." Samantha touched her neck gravely. "How awful he lost some money. I'll do my best."

"I'm sure you will, Miss Silk." Ajax was as saccharine in his voice as she was. I was starting to get diabetes from listening.

I nudged him to cut it out. He pursed his lips, arched down his eyebrows in anger.

"Who is this person and what night was it?" she asked.

I gave her the date, but not the amount of the money lost. I showed her a newspaper clipping of Bill Stevens. She wrinkled her nose.

"Mhmm." She shook her head nervously. "I don't know him at all. I'm sorry. Say," she said so graciously, "I have to meet my boyfriend in fifteen minutes and I need to get dressed "

"Oh," I smiled. "You need us to leave?"

"If you would? I'm sorry I couldn't much help."

We exchanged glances. Ajax raised his eyebrows. I nodded and we stood.

Ajax shrugged. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it."

Samantha walked us to the door. Ajax went through the threshold; I followed.

"I won't," Samantha gave an obliging smile, then slammed the door in our faces.

I DECIDED to pay a visit to Kurtzman at his junkyard. A slight overcast made the place even more depressing than it was. Ajax and I pulled up to the open fence just as a Brown Ford sped through. It passed by so fast, we didn't see who was driving. I had to pull over, almost landing my car in a ditch. Ajax got out and tried to catch the license plate. By that time, the brown Ford was already too far down the highway and faded from view.

Ajax got back in my car; we drove through the gate, around cars stacked on top of each other and a barrage of motors, and various other parts scattered amongst several hollowed-out vehicles. Something was wrong. Kurtzman's German Shepards were nowhere to be found. If a vehicle entered the parking lot or a person could be visible, the dogs were there at once.

The answer to that question was soon revealed in the back seat of a '67 Impala with the front end bent up like an accordion. The two German Shepherds lie on top of each other in one bloody lump. Beside the dogs, on the left side, was Stanley Kurtzman, hunched over, his face pressed against the window, his coat tail caught in the door. Two bullet holes had become a part of his very loud attire, in between a short, fat yellow tie, pale blue shirt, and orange and red checkered coat.

"Well," Ajax said. "At least he died with the only things he loved. His dogs and his toupee."

Kurtzman was a fat man with a prominent nose. He was bald, and his toupee had slithered to his shoulders. Something else caught our eyes. In his right hand was another hand. A fake hand. It looked like it came from a mannequin. Small, slender glossy white fingers with a metal cork at the end of the wooden square base at the wrists.

I took a handkerchief from his inside pocket and opened the car door. Kurtzman almost fell out. I knelt, pressed my knee into the dead man's side, and held him in place. I wrapped the handkerchief around the fake hand and pulled it from Kurtzman's grip. It took quite a bit of force, but I was able to free it after a while. With his knee, Ajax pushed Kurtzman over on the dead dogs in the other seat.

"This is curious," I said.

Ajax shied away. "Jesus. Could this shit get any weirder?"

"Ohhh, I bet it does, my friend."

I examined the hand and wondered aloud why in the hell would the killer have a fake hand.

I CALLED Shep and let him know there was a body out at the junkyard on 19. Technically, that was a coin toss as to whose jurisdiction the junkyard fell under. Shep was the Sherriff in Odarko; Calder Limelight was the peace officer in Zachery (formerly known as Darktown, where the black citizens were segregated). Some might say it belongs to Red Stevens in Holloway. Red isn't a very good Sheriff. He actually reminds me of the sheriff in that old John Wayne film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valiance*. Both men were afraid of their own shadows, but if I had to pick who I wanted to back me in a firefight, it wouldn't be Red Stevens.

Funny enough, someone else tipped Red off. He and Shep arrived at the same time with their deputies driving them. Shep in his 61 Ford Galaxy and Red in his 61 Dodge Polara. Red stepped out of his car at the same time Shep did. Harry Brookmire pulled his heavy body and his girth out of the Polara. Ralf nearly fell out of the Galaxy, gangly legs miss-stepping all the way.

The two sheriffs followed.

They eyed each other for a long minute. Red had the whitest, nearly perfect teeth I'd ever seen. But he also had the biggest overbite I'd ever seen. He could chew a hole through a wooden fence with those

choppers. He also had this permanent “don’t fuck with me” expression and you really couldn’t tell if he was mad, sad, or one happy son of a bitch. I bet that’s a helluva face he makes when he finishes having sex with his wife.

“Red.” Shep tipped the brim of his hat with a two-finger salute.

“Shep,” Red said after a long sigh. “Who called you?”

“I did,” I chimed in.

“Figures,” Red nodded. “Richard Cole. A man bought and sold to the corporate world. As is his friend Shep Howard.”

“What does that mean?” Shep was in no mood for insensitive words. He was practically menstruating.

“It means you are in my jurisdiction, Shep.”

“I don’t think so. This really belongs to the National Park.”

“Do we have a Park Ranger? Not since Tommy Snoales up and left without a word. So, it’s my area.”

“Hold the hell on,” Shep used his gravelly voice. “You can’t just claim an area ”

I said, “Why can’t both of you police this area.”

Both of them said: “Stay out of this!”

So I found myself leaving two sheriffs to argue and followed their deputies and Ajax to the car where Kurtzman and his dead dogs lay in the backseat of a car. The three of them were hunched down, looking at Kurtzman. His face and forehead were up against the blood-splattered car window.

“What the hell is that?” Ralf bellowed, which caught my attention. Listening to Red and Shep argue was boring the hell out of me.

“I’ve never seen that before,” Brookmire said.

“What is that?” Ajax exclaimed. “A nail in his brain?!”

I cleared the way, brushing Brookmire to the right. I leaned down and realized we’d missed another piece of evidence. Two actually. One,

Kurtzman had been shot three times. Twice in the back and once in the head. His skull had a hole in it as big as a silver dollar, and the wound showed part of the right side of his brain. There was an electrode sticking out of Kurtzman's brain.

Kurtzman had been a mental patient somewhere.

Somebody didn't like the middleman.

They cut Kurtzman right out of the family photo and ripped it to shreds.

Our next move was to follow Miss Silk and her manager/boyfriend Tony Jaffe. They were at a cheap sleazy motel for hours. Ajax was giddy after an hour, whooping it up, howling, barking, and laughing about how that little Jew didn't look like he could handle a woman like that. Hour two, Ajax was antsy. Six Dr. Peppers later and a pack of Winstons, he was ready to tear a new asshole in somebody. That was hour three. So hateful and mean, he called Fats Domino, Willie Dixon, and Peggy Lee every name in the book. He even made up a dirty story about a threesome they had. Made me ill to hear that crap.

I told him to shut the fuck up.

Jaffe came out of the motel first, wearing a pair of swimming trunks and a woman's blouse. Ajax couldn't stop laughing.

"Ooooo " Ajax said. "Kinky son of a bitch."

"He looks good in blue," I said.

Jaffe opened the trunk of a gold Pinto that had been sitting next to the Green LTD he and Samantha drove. He looked over his shoulder and retrieved a small brown suitcase. He slammed the trunk and hurried inside the motel room.

"That's the money," Ajax said.

I raised an eyebrow.

"More than likely. Leo will be pleased when I bring it to him."

"Give a shit if he's pleased," Ajax said. "I want to be paid for my services."

"I told you I would give you twenty percent—"

"I don't want twenty percent, Dick! I want fuckin' half of what you're gettin'!"

I gave out a long sigh.

Shit. He had me. He knew I needed him, just in case something bad went down. And in these cases, they always did.

"Yeah," I said. "Whatever." We got out of the car, looked around. Weird. No activity. For a Thursday evening, no rain, sun shining, nice spring day. I pointed my finger at Ajax's nose. "You just make sure you cover me if anything goes down."

"Get that outta my face," he warned.

"All I'm saying is this shit better go smooth. If it don't, and we still recover the money, your percentage goes down."

"Now how the hell is that fair, Dick? Huh? You recover the money, and it's nasty in there, you still did the job you were hired to do. Why would you cut me down like that? Supposed to be friends."

"Well, Ajax." We started for the alley behind the motel. "We'll be ex-friends if I get killed in there."

Ajax scoffed. "Shit. We can still be friends if you get killed. I'll talk to your grave every day."

"Hmph! That's comforting," I told him.

As we walked around the parking lot behind the motel, a young dark-haired woman was wandering aimlessly in circles. She wore a white dress, no shoes, and her hair in her face. The top of her feet had tiny red drops on them. The young woman was mumbling to herself.

"What's wrong?" Ajax asked.

"I think I know her," I said.

"What?" Ajax took off his sunglasses and glanced around. "What are you talking about? I don't see anybody."

"You don't see her?"

Ajax glared at me.

"What's wrong with you? Look, man, this is the wrong time to have a nervous breakdown!"

"I'm not—what? Where'd she go?"

And just like that, the woman disappeared. I couldn't even finish my argument with Ajax. I shrugged it off.

"Forget it," I told him. "Let's do what we came to do."

"C'mon, now, Dick. If this is going to be a problem—"

"Knock it off, Ajax! I'm not crazy!"

"Okay, okay." He held up his hands and followed me to the backdoor to the room Samantha Silk and Jaffe were staying in.

Suddenly, we heard sirens.

Across the street at the Farmer's Savings and Loan, a barrage of cops rolled in and surrounded the building. Ajax and I exchanged glances.

"What the hell?" I said.

We moved away from the back door of the motel room and peeked through some bushes to watch all the action. Three men with army jackets and stocking masks rushed out of the bank, guns blazing. The first robber crouched at the back of a pickup truck and fired a shotgun. Both blasts blew out the windshield of a police car. Second robber fired his .38; three shots caught a deputy in the chest and left shoulder. The third robber didn't get off a shot at all. He was gunned down just as he ran to a powder blue Impala. The driver of the Impala took off just as the third robber placed a hand on the car door. That was when two bullets embedded in the robber's back.

I saw Sheriff Red Stevens drive up in a Chevy Pickup. He was out of uniform, dressed in flannel shirt and jeans. Looked like he'd been

digging ditches. He exited the truck carrying a double barrel. Even before he could get a shot off, one of the robbers shot the sheriff three times. Once in the chest, once in the neck, and once in the forehead. He was D.O.A. on the spot. That robber was gunned down by a deputy.

After a half hour, the area was finally secured by the county police. An ambulance came to attend those hurt in the gunplay. A black ambulance came and collected Sheriff Red Stevens and two of the bank robbers. The stocking masks were removed and revealed two of the four dancers from the club we'd been at a few days ago.

Camaro, the tall, golden-skinned blonde, and Pinto, a short, big-breasted Mexican girl.

We were shocked.

"Jesus," Ajax said. "What's the world coming to these days? Chicks robbing banks!"

"Now that the show's over with," I said, "let's recover that money."

We moseyed around to the backdoor of the motel room. I felt the rush rise from my accelerating heartbeat to my fingertips, settling at my head. I thought I was going to faint. We drew our guns, both Saturday night specials. Ajax looked at me; I smiled and nodded.

I was ready. He was ready. But were Samantha Silk and Tony Jaffe ready?

We heard sounds of lovemaking. Someone moaning, even squealing. We heard a heavy, deep voice telling the other person they loved it. Immediately we started laughing. I mean, it sounded like one of those movies you go see in the blue house wearing a trench coat. After several minutes of that audio, we were bored.

It was time to make our presence known.

I kicked in the doorknob and the door flew open. Ajax stepped in front of me announcing all parties should freeze. What we saw was not what we were expecting.

Arnold Capp was lying naked on top of a naked Bill Stevens, inserting a long black dildo into Steven's asshole. There were scattered hundreds on the mattress, the floor and underneath the two men. Stevens, breathing heavily and squealing like a dying pig, was lying on his stomach, his face buried in the pillows, his ass arched up.

Ajax and I were in shock.

When the two men finally noticed us, Arnold Capp slid off the bed in a hurry and fell on his ass. He tried to pull the covers from the bed to cover himself. That was the only decent thing Capp ever did for us. When he couldn't pull the covers from Stevens, he burst into tears, sobbing like an overgrown baby as he covered his face with his hands.

"Arnold," Stevens said in a whiny, feminine voice, trying to sound sincere. "What's wrong, honey? Are you feeling bad because we stole that money—" Stevens stopped there. He saw Ajax with a disgusted look on his face, and me with a silly, leering grin. Stevens jumped up from the bed and dashed past us, out the door. He ran naked through the streets with a long black dildo still in his ass.

PART 2

FROM THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OCCULT
ARTIFACTS
BY RUSSEL DE'BLANC

(Copyright 1969)

THE OBJECT

Color: Black

5 x 5 x 12 inches

Weight: 7 ounces.

Made of Unknown material—sometimes described as made of granite, other times silk or unknown fabric.

THE OBJECT, often referred to as the Obelisk, was discovered in 1935 by Charles Shandt in Egypt during an exploration of the Tomb of Orasis, one of many of spellbinding Doctors that served King Tutankhamun, a pharaoh that ruled 1332-1323 BC. Discovering the purpose of the Obelisk became Shandt's lifelong obsession. In his research that took him all over the world, several of these statues would pop up in the strangest areas: Nigeria, Paris, Atlanta, Georgia, Ukraine, and Thailand.

Shandt wrote in his diaries that many people who found the statue had seen bright lights in the sky and the object fall to the ground. Upon touching the Obelisk, they immediately lose or discover time gaps, or chronological events of their lives have no order, often repeating key

moments several times before moving on. A priest in Paris told Shandt that he would often find himself making tea for a young lady he eventually impregnated and resulted in his dismissal from the church. This young lady became his wife, but he kept reliving that moment where he made her tea and a meal, next finding himself caring for their toddler, and jumping back to the tea and meal, then to the point of seeing his wife bedridden, dying of cancer, back to the tea and meal, and forward to taking his son to school, back to the tea and meal, forward to his wife and he listening to their son act on a radio program.

Also, many people said the Obelisk was a living, breathing artifact, witnessing the Object's material expand and deflate as if it had lungs. Sometimes people heard heartbeats when all was quiet, and others reported hearing the moaning or crying of a woman who was seen roaming in the night, her wailing waking everyone, as was written by a farmer in Atlanta. Other times, those who have the statue in their possession used the Obelisk for wish fulfillment, such as the case in Thailand. A woman wished her mother to be alive. Walking through the village she saw a skeletal figure oozing flesh standing among crowds. This skeletal figure at first wasn't noticed by anyone, but there was a complaint of foul odor, "something dead." Arriving home, the woman saw the skeletal figure sitting at the kitchen table, feeding the woman's newborn child.

WE DROVE to the Brookmire Stadium for a concert. I was not a huge Rock-n-Roll person, but Alice really wanted to see Led Zeppelin. I didn't know a lot about them except they were English and they were massively popular. Beatles popular. I remember seeing young people with the T-shirts and thinking the designs were weird. Not that I disliked the designs, it was just weird.

Alice played me several songs from different albums. The band was extremely loud and, for the most part, rude. Somehow, I found myself liking the songs. Especially the more bluesy ones. The double album, as people are calling them today, had one song I really liked. "In My Time of Dying." I'm more into folk songs. They had a few folk-influenced songs and those are really good.

Now, it is of the understanding that Led Zeppelin didn't have opening acts, and it was rumored that their manager Peter Grant didn't want his boys showed up. This particular concert I attended had two opening acts, which was why the handbills always said in huge, bold letters: AN EVENING WITH LED ZEPPELIN.

Before the show started, I got lost trying to find the concessions stand that had the poster Alice wanted. I was met with a barrage of independent dealers selling T-Shirts and posters and I ended up buying

shirts and posters from several of them. None of them had a poster of just John Paul Jones. For some reason, Alice had a huge crush on the bass player. Normally, the lead singer got the full attention of the music lover; after him it would be the guitarist. Rarely, it was the drummer, even rarer was the bass player.

I seemed to find myself almost backstage near one of the dressing rooms. I heard three voices. One was shrill, harsh, a New York accent. The second voice was frail, quiet, like a whisper. Calm. The third, loud, boisterous, east London accent. I caught a glimpse of two men. A huge burley one in flared jeans, open, flowered shirt. His hairline was receding and his long dark beard matched his unruly, slightly long hair. The second man was Alan Kohl.

"I'm not allowing some fucking guy to bring in another act to fucking play to my boys' audience," the big burly man said, his voice booming. He smacked his hand with every word spoken. "Your performer ain't performing!"

Kohl didn't flinch. The man was four times his size. He stepped forward to meet the burley man's threatening status. Kohl placed both hands on his hips and twisted his head like a squawking chicken when spoke.

"I know about you, Limey," Kohl said. "You use hard-ass tactics, threats. You think you scare people because you eat a ton of spaghetti and drink a barrel of piss-beer. I'm not scared of you. My guy opens. How hard is it to give ten minutes up, huh?"

"Insulting me just gets my dander up, little man," the burly man said. "You ain't fucking telling me how to manage my boys. I didn't fly half across the world to Americ-er for some pigeon to muscle me. I don't care what anybody else says. That fucking folky shit is outdated and you're performer ain't performing, riding on the coattails of my boys' success."

"Look, Mr. Grant, Mr. Kohl," the promoter finally spoke up. "No need for threats or slinging insults. I think Mr. Kohl is only saying you brought Maggie Bell along—"

"That's my business!" the burly man screamed hoarsely. "He ain't goin' on our stage! He ain't performin'!"

Kohl snarled, stayed his ground. "Our mutual friends say different," Kohl said through gnashed teeth. Kohl whispered the mutual friend's name. There was a roar of a rowdy audience and I missed the name. But I thought what he said was Reliant.

The burly man took a step back. The room was silent.

The Brookmire was packed with people. We were in the third row from the stage. The band was loud. People were loud. The concert was three hours long. I had a headache at the end. The audience was so rowdy that during the opening act, a folk singer, Billy Crabb, backed by a bass player and a drummer, they threw things at him and the MC had to stop the show a few times. A glass bottle, maybe a whiskey bottle, sailed over our heads and landed at Crabb's feet. Glass shards sprayed him; one nicked his cheek. The MC and a bear of a man with long hair, balding on top, and long beard came from around backstage. Security helped Crabb off the stage. The bear spoke into the microphone, an East London accent bellowed:

"Fucking tossers! Eat shit and die!"

The audience booed.

Nearly a half an hour passed before the lights came back on. The crowd was even more restless. I started to fear for our lives. Alice said wait, it will be okay.

The middle act was blues singer Maggie Bell. The audience was okay with her. Just loud catcalls and whistles, lots of cheering. They asked for

her to flash her tits. And that was the three college girls a few seats from us. That made Alice laugh. I'll give it to Maggie Bell. She could really belt it out. Her voice cut through the raucous audience and the band was loud enough to keep their attention.

Even during Led Zeppelin's show two fistfights broke out. Two guys just started punching each other and fell out of their seats rolling down the stairwell. Another fight was between two girls. Very brutal. Biting, clumps of hair pulled out, and eye gouging. After that, a small riot was on the cops hands but was squashed immediately. I wanted to leave. I was afraid for my life, but I didn't want to disappoint Alice.

Too bad they stopped Billy Crabb. I really liked his songs. One song called "Long Gone Dead" was excellent. Tinged with country, reminded me of Waylon Jennings and the new style of country music coming out.

Led Zeppelin, although too loud for me, was good. Latter half of the show, with their brand of folk and country, I found myself enjoying it. Then they went back into the loud, crushing guitars, pounding drums, and squealing vocals. They ended the concert with "In My Time of Dying", the one I liked the best. By the end of the concert, I had been converted. I couldn't stop talking about them. The band, the songs or the crowd, and how I was going to buy more of their records for my stereo.

I had fun.

Alice enjoyed herself. On the way back to her apartment she talked nonstop. She made me stay with her that night, or early morning I should say. We drank coffee, ate leftover spaghetti. She talked about her love of music. Art. How she loved Romance comics as a little girl. She liked Wonder Woman, but was not a fan of her outfit. She did love Horror comics of the 1950's. Loved the old E.C. comics. Became obsessed with music as a teenager. So much so, her parents became concerned.

"I started skipping school to go see Johnny Halo and the Angels," she said. "They were the best group in Chicago."

"Is that where you're from? I thought you were from Oakland."

"I'm from all over," she said. "My dad was a major in the army. He hated music. Thought art was dumb. Not useful to anyone."

"Is that so?"

Alice shrugged. "Yeah." She thought about the past; her facial movements showed it was not a nice past. "Did you know I was a runaway?"

I shook my head and said: "No."

"After my dad retired from the army, we moved to a farm. The retirement was forced on him. He was not a happy man. He drank a lot. I wasn't sure, but I think he beat my mom."

"I'm sorry you had a rough upbringing," I said.

Alice smiled. "It wasn't always rough. The realization that fairy tales don't exist, and there's no Prince Charming to save you is what ruined my childhood. So I ran away."

I rolled over and hugged tightly. We kissed and fell asleep, cheek to cheek. Some time had passed, but not much. I found myself nearly out of the bed, legs hanging off, lying on my stomach. Alice was on her side, snuggled to a pillow, in a fetal position.

The phone rang, tore us both out of deep sleep.

"Hello?" Alice asked groggily. The voice on the end answered and she placed the phone on my chest. "It's for you."

Alice got up. Left the bedroom. She took a pillow and a blanket with her. I was dumbfounded. Who would be calling at this number? I didn't give out her number.

"Hello?"

"They almost found me because the stunt you pulled," the agitated man said on the phone.

I sat up and thought about that statement.

"I pull a lot of stunts. Can you remind me of one in particular?"

"You gave me a ride!"

Then it clicked who it was.

"You stole my car," I said. "Is that any way to repay someone for doing a good deed?"

"You took me somewhere I didn't want to be!"

"Where are you now," I asked in a calmer voice.

"Ohhh, no," the man laughed. "You're not going to trip me up like that!"

"I tell you what," I said. "I'm going to hang up and you never call me ever!"

"Wait-wait—I'm sorry. I-I need your help. They almost caught up to me. I have nowhere to turn."

"You can go to the police," I said.

In a frightened, almost child-like voice, he said: "I-I can't They're working with the police. They came there and talked to you—"

"Who are they, mister?"

He sighed. His voice broke. "One says he's FBI. The other is a lawyer."

I jumped out of bed, started pacing.

"Why are they after you?"

"The work I was doing." The phone line began to sizzle and pop. He hesitated, blurted out: "I worked for a lab. I-I—no! I can't say anymore! They're listening!"

"Hold on," I told the man. "Why don't we meet?"

"Yes," he said after some silence. "I'll come to you."

"When? Where?"

"I'll let you know," the man said and abruptly hung up.

I sat there with the phone still in my hand, thinking. The bedroom door opened and Alice walked in. She was nearly covered in shadows

and her oval face caught the light from the lamp. It spooked me. I dropped the phone and glared at her.

She said, "What's wrong? Who was that on the phone?"

"Nothing," I said, swallowed hard. "I don't know who it was."

Alice sat on the bed with me. She rubbed my arm, pulled away quickly.

"You're wet!" She placed her hand on the shoulder of my T-shirt. She gasped. "You're soaked through!"

ONCE RELIANT LET the news media report Bobby Clarke's death, it was all you heard. Nothing else that went on in the world mattered. What went on in the White House with President Ford was dull and boring to everyone. Overseas, the news was minuscule compared to the shooting death of Soul/Funk singer Bobby Clarke, whose biggest hit was released three years ago with "Baby, You Know It".

Leo called me. He said it was okay to go question the family. He'd held off on that to give Monica time to grieve for her husband. She was in town and had identified the body. The twenty-five-room house was on four acres out near the newly built University in what used to be called Darktown. From what Leo said, Bobby was the main donator and instigator in the creation of the University.

I went to the General Store to pick Ajax up. He was my guide through Zachary. I seemed to have made an enemy out of one Kevan Johnson, once a low-level pimp, now runs everything in Zachary after underworld kingpin Dozen Grant was murdered. I took a case working with Oklahoma District Attorney's Office looking into bribery of State Police, and racketeering. Johnson was the front-runner in that investigation, but somehow the case was dropped. I endured countless threats by telephone, mail, and shadowy figures following me for nearly

four months. I told Leo about it, and the threats stopped, but I wasn't allowed in Darktown unless I had a chaperone.

Ajax phoned earlier and said he had some information about the Callums' daughter. I pulled up to the side of the building by the gas pumps. A pimply teenage boy with buckteeth asked if I wanted leaded or unleaded. I told him I wasn't there for gas, just to pick up a friend. He looked disappointed, tugged the bill of his A's cap, lumbered back to the front porch of the General store where he promptly sat in an old weather-beaten rocking chair. He glared at me for some reason. Maybe he held a grudge because I wouldn't buy any gas.

The passenger door opened quickly and my attention turned to Ajax, cursing under his breath and bending his lanky body to sit next to me.

"You gotta buy a bigger car, man," he said.

"If you got the money, honey " I laughed.

"Damn, I wish I'd never showed you that freakin' comic book!"

"You'll never live that down, Ajax," I said.

"Reading is reading, my friend. Whether it's Shakespeare or one of those funny books your girlfriend illustrates."

"I like funny books. Even the ones where the hero says, give me the money, honey!" I laughed and Ajax joined in with his chortling followed by a wheezing sound. I swear I've never been around a more nerdy black man than Ajax. He could tell me the plot of every *Twilight Zone* episode and his theories of the ending of the *Planet of the Apes* movies.

We were about to head out when a gruff voice at my ear called out. It was reporter Terry Lynn. He was so close I smelled cigarettes, beer, and chili dogs on his breath, not to mention body odor. Terry, a heavysset man in a dark jacket, plaid pants and stained raincoat, was at my window. His thick dark clump of hair was combed over to the right to cover up a bald spot that started in the middle and made its way to the left ear lobe. He was disheveled. His tie was loose around his fat

neck, and his shirt tail was halfway out of his yellow-red plaid dress pants.

"I need to talk to you guys," he slurred.

"The hell, Terry," I said in protest. "We don't have time—"

Before I knew it, Terry was in the backseat, huffing and puffing, adjusting himself to a level of comfort.

"I just wanna talk. Okay?"

Ajax fanned his nose with a hand. "Terry, Jesus, what rock did you crawl from under?"

"I haven't been home in a few days. I was out chasing a lead," he said. "Finding a shower was tough."

"You always had a hard time finding a shower, Terry," I said.

"Look, can we cut the *MAD Magazine* jokes? Just for a second?" Terry sighed, raking his face clumsily.

I nodded, watched him in the rearview mirror. He was trying not to nod off. Looked like he had mascara clumped under his eyes, but Ajax and I knew they were dark circles. Terry Lynn was always known as an obsessive reporter. He was also known to have a bad heroin habit.

"You're using again," I said. "Aren't you, Terry?"

"Don't rag me, Cole. Come on. I'm under a lot of strain working for the *Tri-area Statesman*."

"Just a newspaper," Ajax said. "You have years of experience. Why don't you get a job at another paper with less pressure?"

"I'm not giving up. Y'know how these cracker assholes in this area are, Ajax. You have to fight for what you want."

I was getting a headache from all this. I needed to get to Zachery and talk to Bobby Clarke's family.

"What do you want, Terry?" I screamed. "We have somewhere to be!"

"Jesus, Dick," he chuckled. "No reason to be so hostile. Look, somebody has been chattering about you and well." He threw his hands

in the air. "I wanted to let you know. That's all." Terry slapped the backseat, glanced out the window.

"Spill it then," I told him.

"All right." He rubbed his face again, trying not to nod off. "I might as well be truthful with you. I was out buying. Y'know for a friend "

"Uh-huh, sure, Terry. Go on."

"I went to Dallas Street."

"Where the California Club is?" Ajax asked. "The whore house?"

"Yeah, Ajax. The whore house. Not the Jesuit school, the California Club. Of course the fuckin whore house. Look, that's where my—"

"Pusher," I interrupted him.

Terry glared at me. "Yes. Pusher. Get off your high horse, Cole! We all have our vices." He sighed, took inventory of his emotions, waited before he said more. "You guys remember a huckster by the name of Stanley Kurtzman?"

"Yeah," Ajax said. "He's dead. Been dead for three years."

"So it was reported," Terry said.

"The hell you say!" I exclaimed. "We found his body out in his junkyard!"

"Look, all I'm saying is I saw Kurtzman at the California Club getting a blowjob from two Korean girls."

"We identified him, Terry," I said. "Ajax and I found him in his car, dead, bullets in his body."

After a long silence, Ajax turned quickly and said: "So who was asking about us?"

"That's what I'm getting at," Terry paused. "Some guy named Kohl."

"I don't know a Kohl," Ajax said.

I chuckled. "I do." Ajax leaned in toward me, wanting to hear more. "He's a lawyer who was also Bobby Clarke's manager."

"Yeah." Wrinkles exploded on Terry's forehead. Either he was struggling to stay awake or he was genuinely confused. "Bobby Clarke, a somewhat squeaky clean pop singer, speaks out against drug use, pillar to the black community, winds up shot dead in a sleazy motel. Go figure. Shows that this world is darker than we want to believe it is."

I turned and glanced at this junkie newspaper reporter waxing poetic. I had a more pressing question than wanting to hear his philosophy. "How did you happen to have a conversation with Kohl in a sex club, Terry?"

He smiled hugely. "Wait," he pointed an accusing finger at me, "you think I'm working on a story."

"Terry," I told him, "only three things really matter to you."

A wry smile rolled across Terry's face. "What's that, Dick?" He emphasized the "Dick" as in I was being one to him.

"Food, heroin and a sensational story you can obsess over."

Terry shrugged. The smile vanished as he glanced out the car window. He was pissed, but he knew I was right.

"Yeah," he said, edge in his voice. "I'm working on something."

"Tell us, then," I said.

"Why?"

"If Ajax and I are murdered because you had vital info for us, you couldn't live with yourself."

"Jesus, Dick! You have to go dark like that?"

"Being real, Terry," I told him.

"And you're working on the Bobby Clarke murder," Terry said flatly with a smirk.

I turned around to face him. Terry decided he was going to lounge in my backseat. He laid down on his right side and rested the back of

his head on the door.

"No comment."

"Uh, you know, a no comment is more incriminating than a comment," he said.

"Tell us what you're working on, Terry," Ajax said. "Or we'll wait for you to nod off and we'll drive to the hospital, dump you there, and tell them you were ODeD!"

Terry sat up quickly. He gave us a stern, but concerned look. I have to say I was shocked Ajax said that. Given Ajax's reputation on the street, Terry had better cough up an answer. To the public, they would have laughed off this out-of-work actor.

"Rumors are that the government secretly dosed whore houses around the country with L.S.D."

"Where did you hear that?" I asked.

He took a sharp intake of air. "You know I don't give up my sources."

"Cody Carrol," Ajax blurted out.

Terry's mouth opened and closed several times. Confusion crossed his face once more.

"How did you know that?"

"I helped him out of a jam a few nights ago," Ajax said. "Cody can't keep his mouth shut. You need to get a better source."

Terry scoffed. "You don't believe him?"

"That mother fucker has been telling that story since nineteen sixty-seven."

"I think there's something to it," Terry said. "He showed me."

"Showed you what?" I asked.

"Red room. Had all the fixings Johns like. Red carpet, heart-shaped bed, red wallpaper, nudie pics in frames, red glowing lamps. Girls with big breasts in lingerie. Behind a framed nudie pic is a camera making

movies of the whores and Johns's seedy exploits. He said it was FBI equipment. They want movies of celebs on their dangerous list. Marlon Brando, Lilly Tomlin "

"Lilly Tomlin?"

"Lilly Tomlin. Yeah. Lilly Tomlin. John Lennon, Sammy Davis, Sonny Bono "

"Sonny Bono is dangerous to the government." Ajax laughed. "God help this country."

"You joke," Terry said. "It doesn't matter what you think enemies should look like or act like, or if they have variety shows. You get on that government enemy list, your ass is toast. The list goes on."

"So do you," I said.

Terry looked hurt. But he continued. "Anyways, the room was empty momentarily. So Cody took me in there. He showed me the two mirrors where other cameras operate. He showed me the perfume bottles the whores spray around the room like a mister, you know. Has Lysergic Acid Diethylamide in it. Same for the whiskey and gin the girls serve the Johns."

"Okay," I said. "Why are you telling me this?"

"When I was in there, a few days ago, that lawyer that was asking about you, Kohl?"

"Yeah?"

"He was in there with Bobby Clarke. I heard Clarke say as they passed by me: 'Reliant is staking me.' Staking him for what, Dick? I know you know."

I chuckled. "Now you're trying to strong-arm me, Terry? You know it's client privilege."

"Oh blow it out your ass, Cole! I give you something, you should give me something."

I know, I know. I shouldn't have given Terry anything but he guilted me into it and, hell, the cops would ask Leo, and he'd tell them.

"All right, Terry. Reliant was bankrolling Clarke a record label."

"No shit?" He smiled.

"No shit," I said. I thought a minute. "How come I don't know this Cody Carrol?"

Terry raised up, chuckled. "I guess you don't hang around the right people."

With that statement Journalist Terry Lynn exited my car. He left me perplexed with that insult and Ajax roaring with laughter.

AJAX and I rode to Zachery avoiding the usual route to the entrance of the town. The backway was the new high school and a fire trail that lead to the lake. On the way he told me what he'd found out about the Callums' missing daughter.

"There's been a divide between the parents and the girl," Ajax said.

"Emily," I said. We glanced at each other. "Her name is Emily, and I figured as much."

I was having a hard time controlling my stammer. Amazingly I did so, by biting my lower lip.

"A boy is involved." Ajax smirked.

"Again, I sur-sur-surmised, b-b-buddy." I breathed hard and repeated without the stammer. "I surmised."

"An Arthur Jackson. He and Emily met at the coffee house on Tanyard. He goes to Zachary College. Looks like Emily and he became quite an item. Parents didn't approve."

"Hair too long?"

"Too dark," Ajax said. "Emily brought a black man home."

Nothing was said for a while. We drove through Zachary, formerly known as Darktown. Still the same shanties standing that stood in the

early 30s, still the same poor people standing idle, guarding the streets against strangers and authority figures.

"You know where Arthur Jackson is?"

"Funny you ask." Ajax pointed a finger to a tall lanky young black man in a purple T-shirt and a green sweater vest, corduroy pants. He shuffled down the street quickly, adjusting and readjusting his large-rimmed glasses on his small oval face.

Arthur cut through a side street near the barber shop and into a vacant parking lot. We pulled into the parking space of a bank and watched him disappear into the woods.

"Don't worry," Ajax told me. "I know exactly where he's going."

Basically, Arthur had just doubled back to the Lake. I killed the engine on the Javelin. Nonchalantly, inconspicuously, Ajax led me through a deli. All the onlookers on the street watched a black man and a white man pass them by. We passed through a double door; a bell chimed loudly. Ajax spoke to a very old man in very large glasses and an apron. They did some sort of odd ritualistic handshake. The old man asked Ajax about his mother, and Ajax reminded the man that his mother had been dead almost as long as Ajax had been alive.

We proceeded to the stockroom where a younger man was butchering a cow. Blood spilled everywhere and the smell didn't seem to bother anyone but me. My stomach turned and a lump formed in my throat. They did a complicated handshake, spoke briefly about the Rams and the Lakers. Ajax moved some boxes of plastic silverware and napkins to reveal a door.

Out this door and into a parking lot with a Ford LTD parked next to a Chevrolet double-cab pickup. I followed Ajax out of the parking lot and into the woods.

"If anyone was in trouble with the law," Ajax said, "or a bill collector was after them, they always cut through Mr. Sanders Deli. Grab a

sandwich and run out the backway to hide in woods.”

“I didn’t get my corn beef on rye,” I told him.

“I’ll buy you an R.C. when we’re done here.”

“You’ll buy me a beer when we’re done here.”

There he was, laid up under a tree, catching an afternoon breeze. His legs stretched out, his head using a tree trunk as a pillow. The water in the lake rippled as the birds sang away their blues. I wanted to join Arthur, forget all this for the rest of evening. He rose quickly when he heard our shoes on some twigs.

“Don’t run.” Ajax extended a finger. “We’re not here to hurt you, Arthur.”

“We just want to ask you some questions about Emily.”

“I don’t know an Emily.” He tried to act tough. The act fell hard on its ass. No one could believe this guy was anything but a college kid. His demeanor was middle class and his mannerisms spoke volumes of being raised by educators.

“We know better, Arthur,” I said. I showed him my P.I. license. He let out a heavy sigh. “You know Emily Callum. Her parents hired us. You two are an item.”

“We know more than you think, Arthur,” Ajax said. “We just want to return her safely to her parents. That’s all.”

He welled up. Tears ran down his cheeks and into his trembling lips. He shook hard as sobs exerted from the back of his throat.

“I-I- don’t know—where Emily is!”

“Hey, hey.” Ajax took the young man by the arm. “Nobody is in trouble.”

“The Callums just want her back home safely,” I inserted. “That’s all.”

Arthur continued, still very upset. “We-we were out here, getting ready to ” He trailed off, weeping so hard he had to stomp his right foot

to get back on track. "I was taking off my pants and I looked up at her and she'd just vanished!"

"Whoa, guy," Ajax patted Arthur on the back. "Start at the beginning. Where did you two meet?"

"Last year we met at Stacie's," Arthur said. He shook his head to fight back more sobs.

"Coffee house around the corner," Ajax informed me. I nodded to him.

Arthur continued: "She was the sweetest person I had ever met," he wiped his eyes. "So smart. I wanted her to enroll here at Zachery College. But she said she was done with school."

"She wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb?" I prodded. I wanted to get a reaction from him. He let it go. Ajax on the other hand arched his eyebrows, sensing hostility from me.

"They wouldn't have taken her anyway. It's an exclusive black college," Arthur said. "Anyway, we hit it off. I sat at her table. We talked about music. Books. A lot of things."

"She brought you home to meet the Callums. A black man in a white rancher's house?"

"Hey, man," Ajax tapped me with his hand. "What gives?"

I ignored him and continued with my rankling of Arthur.

"Not at first. After four months of secret dating—"

"So you're saying a white girl, raised up right, came into a coffee house to drink coffee and listen to bad beat poetry in a black neighborhood was just there for a culture shake-up?"

"Well, yeah," Arthur was getting upset, but it was tame. He didn't raise his voice at all. Still calm, smooth, but the look on his face showed he wanted to rip me apart. "That was all she was there for."

Arthur was shaking even more. At first I believed it was grief doing him in. The more I looked him in the eyes, I knew it was something

else.

"Did you fuck her, Arthur? That night?"

"Hey, man!" Ajax was completely pissed by now. He got in my face, snarling, sputtering. "Better knock it off, Dick. I'm telling you."

"You stick your little black cock in that innocent white girl's snatch —"

Ajax pushed me. I trotted backwards, almost fell on my ass. The birds' songs had become violent. The wind picked up and blew the trees over. Even the choppy waters of the lake were angry at me. Arthur just sat there, shaking, concerned if he was going to have to run if a fight broke out.

"Stop talking, Dick!" Ajax warned. "What is wrong with you!?"

I held up my hands. No way was I going to fight someone who had become the closest thing I had to an actual brother. I slowly walked back to where Arthur sat on a rock.

"Arthur, why are you telling us this bullshit story?" I said.

"What?" Arthur shook his head. "I'm not."

"Don't sanitize this!" I screamed at him. "Emily can be in danger. Out there, alone? You need to tell the truth! Or I will take you to the cops and tell them you had a hand in her disappearance!"

"You wouldn't do "

Ajax was confused by my hostility toward the young man.

"Dick," he shook his head. "I shouldn't have brought you here. I didn't peg you as a racist shithead."

"I'm not," I said to Ajax. "You know me better than that. Arthur is not being truthful."

"How do you know?!" Ajax screamed.

I grabbed Arthur by the arm and yanked him to a standing position. He told me to get off of him and Ajax tried to remove my hands. I

stood my ground, rolled the thin jacket sleeve up to show the world the needle marks that started from the wrist and tailed at his elbow.

"You can't trust a word a junkie says!" I yelled, my words carried and the pitch of my echoing voice bounced off the water.

I let go of Arthur's arm. He pulled away as soon as my grasp loosened. He turned his back to us. Ajax and I exchanged uncomfortable glances. Nothing was said for a while. The silence gave him time to reflect on what he'd been saying.

Still holding his arm as if I'd yanked it out of the socket, Arthur turned to us. "You're right," he said solemnly. "I was whitewashing everything."

"So why don't you tell us the truth," I said.

"We dated in secret for a week or two. Emily told her parents about me. They said to bring me home for dinner."

"Did they know you were black?"

"Emily told them. At first I think they tolerated it. I could feel the tension from her mother."

"Her mother? Not Callum himself?" I asked, knowing how Callum was, a very spiteful, resentful, hard man who cared about nothing but his ranch and making money.

"No," Arthur shook his head. "He was ecstatic that Emily found someone. He said he wanted her to bring in her husband to help run the ranch. The mother wouldn't even talk to him at first. Then she started making snide remarks. Weird jokes about how Hitler was right."

"About?"

"Race, I guess," Arthur answered curtly. "Mr. Callum was so cool. Nice to me. That irritated Mrs. Callum. One day I came there and she and Emily were fighting. Screaming, yelling about me. Mrs. Callum slapped Emily. Said she didn't want nigger children in her family. I grabbed Emily and we ran. I already had a habit. A few weeks later,

Mr. and Mrs. Callum caught us stealing their TV and tractor equipment. Mr. Callum pulled his shotgun on me. I took off. They kept Emily for a week or so, then she found me. Once in a while, Mr. Callum would come looking for us. Bring us food, give us money. We started staying with a friend. "

"Who is this friend?" Ajax asked.

Arthur hesitated.

"Not really a friend."

"Tell us, Arthur," I said. "Could be important. Maybe Emily went back to live with him."

"Okay. Not a friend. To be honest," Arthur said. "Just an old man who lives in a house by himself. He's got memory problems. Kept calling Emily Susan. We just kinda stayed there for a few months until his real daughter found us shooting up and everything. She ran us off. That's when we started living on the streets."

"Who's the old guy?" I asked.

"I don't know who he is. He lives in this huge pink house on Waters Drive."

"At the edge of Zachery?" Ajax blurted out.

"Yeah. Nice old guy. Kinda weird though. He was always saying he had a deadline and a book signing. We didn't care. We just pretended to be his kids and he gave us money."

"Who did you buy your dope from?" I asked.

"Just some guy, man. I can't really remember—"

"Give us his name," Ajax said.

"We need to track Emily," I told Arthur.

He thought hard. Finally the name popped in his head. He was excited, proud that he remembered.

"Cody!"

"Cody Carrol?" I asked.

"Yeah. You know him?"

Aja chuckled. I shook my head.

"No. I think I should. Where can we find him?"

"At the coffee house," Arthur said. "I gotta tell ya about the last time I saw Emily. We were out here, by the lake. Getting ready for bed. I turned to hear a noise. I looked up and in the sky right above the lake was this disturbance. The horizon was distorted. That distortion rolled across the water and "

His words trailed off. Arthur was lost in deep thought.

"What happened Arthur?" I asked.

"That distortion swallowed Emily up."

I GAVE ARTHUR A TWENTY, told him he should go back home. We offered him a ride to his parent's house; he declined, saying he had to think things through. He thought he should conduct his own search for Emily. I let him know Ajax and I would not stop until we found her. That seemed to satisfy him. He said nothing else. The conversation stopped suddenly and the moment drifted into solemn disconnect.

I found myself slipping into unconscious morose country. Just beyond the horizon of the rippling water of the lake, I saw the beginnings of a distortion. Beyond that, stood a building that nearly touched the sky. Windows were everywhere on this grey monstrosity, foreboding in its grand scale. The clouds surrounding top floor became dark, evil.

My heart pounded, my throat was dry. A sharp pain stabbed at my eyes on a 4/7 beat of a funk song. A ringing entered my eardrums and all sounds were drowned out. Suddenly, I could taste a mixture of blood and fresh water in my mouth.

"Dick?" I heard Ajax say. "Dick, c'mon."

His voice brought me back to my reality.

"Yeah," I said. We walked to the car, avoiding some teenagers driving wildly in a souped-up Cadillac. "What's that building just beyond the lake?"

"The hospital," Ajax said. "You should know that."

"County General?" I asked.

"No," Ajax said softly. "Dick that's a mental hospital. Summerville. You dried out there a few years ago."

I glared at him. Suddenly, I thought I remembered. Really the only memory I had was leaving the facility in a wrinkled brown shirt, wrinkled trousers, a stained white sports coat and slippers. All of which were items courtesy of the hospital.

"Yeah." I flashed a smile and nodded. We climbed into the Javelin. I started the car and peeled rubber, driving as fast I could from the visage of that monstrosity that sat out on the horizon beyond the lake.

THE NEXT DAY Leo and I drove out to see Irene Clarke.

Ajax couldn't make it. He said he had something very important to take care of.

I'd been dreading it. I didn't really know how to approach the situation. She would be grieving and I needed answers. Lately, I'd been less than human to other people. I'd been a rabid dog.

I rode with Leo and his driver, rolling through Zachery in a white Mercedes, through the streets of the downtrodden, the repressed. The poor among poor. You could feel the anger rising from the streets like the humidity. And like yesterday, people gathered in those angry streets, only more of them. They hovered in droves of twenties. Watching, plotting.

What the hell was going on?

"Are you all right?" Leo asked.

I nodded slowly, watching the people on the street as they watched us suspiciously.

"I'm not," Leo said. "My stomach is in knots. I have to tell a friend her husband is no longer living."

"Did you release it to the news?"

"Just now. Burt, turn on the car radio. Maybe we'll catch the news."

The heavy-set Italian driver tipped his hat and did as he was told. An abrasive man interrupted a commercial to let his listeners know that R&B singer Bobby Clarke had been fatally shot last night.

“Clarke had a string of pop hits from 1964-66 and wasn’t heard from again until 1969 when he released the massive album *Unbroken Chain*. With that album, Clarke brought soul and rock together, with more introspective lyrics about what it’s like to live in a black man’s world. As he was quoted saying about the music he’d been creating since that album. He released the single ‘Earth Ain’t Hell (Or Heaven)’ in 1970 staying at the top of the charts for six weeks. Bobby Clarke was only thirty-six. More details to come as soon as we know them.”

A song replaced the man’s voice. Hypnotized by Fleetwood Mac, singing about levitation and flying over the mountains. We drove through the town of Zachery and into what used to be called the Flats, where old farmhouses used to stand. The people living there were moved out and into the town in apartment buildings. Those farmhouses were knocked down for Bobby Clarke’s mansion and the University of Zachery.

We drove past the University. It was a huge campus. Long, sprawling with buildings clustered together, it almost looked like a town in itself. Long paved sidewalks weaved in and around those buildings, leading to a football field. Students busked as if they were Wall Street brokers late for work.

The song on the radio changed in a strange twist of fate. Just as we entered the driveway of the now-deceased Bobby Clarke’s mansion, one of his most popular songs played through the speakers. “It’s a War on Our Hearts” wasn’t originally released as a single, but FM rock stations picked up on the song from his 1972 album *Double Winged Angel*, considered a flop when it hit the shelves. A year later, four songs ended up charting on the Hot 100, thanks to those FM stations. “It’s a War on

Our Hearts” Parts One and Two can be heard on the crime film *Holler in the Streets*.

I would learn later that the mansion had twenty-two rooms. An elevator took you upstairs and to a basement. In the driveway were two Cadillacs, black and white; one red Ferrari; and two gold-colored Trans Ams. I was told a Ford Pickup and a Lamborghini were in the garages. One of the Trans Ams belonged to Devon Spears, close friend and guitarist for Bobby Clarke.

A servant took Leo and me to the pool bungalow. The older, chubby black woman said she knew for sure Mrs. Clarke was entertaining there. The woman walked like Igor, only her limp seemed to take her in a left direction, which often resulted in bumping into things, or stepping on the dog’s tail. Neither transgressions bothered her, nor a tongue lashing from Mrs. Clarke.

“How many times have I told you, Imelda,” Irene Clarke chastised. “Use the damn intercom! Bobby bought the damn thing so you can let us know who is here!”

Irene was a tall glass of water. Very obvious from her beauty and grace, she used to be a model. She held her head high; the flaxen brown hair moved as she commanded it. Her smooth, bronzed, swan-like neck was connected to a voluptuous frame that might cause her one-piece bathing suit to burst into pieces at any moment. And when she stood from the pool chair and glided toward us, I felt like I was drunk from overt sexuality. Her crass street demeanor contradicted her trained gracefulness. She was a tigress willing and able to protect her surroundings, waiting to pounce.

Imelda snarled at Irene. She wanted to retort, but decided it was best to take the punishment.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll do it next time,” she said.

“You damn right you will,” Irene said.

Imelda slowly departed and tried her best not to let the company see her limp.

Off in the eastern part of the long pool sat a young black male and an older white male. They were swimming trunks still damp from swimming. The young black male I didn't recognize. He was short, muscled, with a small afro. The silver oval-shaped shades protected his eyes from the sun and prevented me from seeing them. The white man had to be in his thirties. His brown hair was slicked back and his skinny arms looked like someone had used them for a pin cushion.

Took a few minutes to register, but I knew him. He was that folk singer I'd seen at the Led Zeppelin concert. Billy Crabb. His face looked like miles of a bumpy road, and his body looked like it was rejecting both disease and medical attention.

Billy Crabb and the young black man conversed and a nervous Billy shuffled off to the bungalow. The black male made his way

"Leo," she greeted coldly. "I wish you had telephoned first." She didn't offer her hand. Leo wanted to. He kept making it visible to her, and Irene ignored the gesture.

"I felt it would be more comforting—"

"To just show up unexpectantly," Irene cut him off.

"It's not as cut and dried as that, Irene," Leo retorted. "I'm very sorry about Bobby. He is—was will always be a great friend to me."

"Ah," was all she said. Her demeanor was not what I expected. The young black male came to her side. He looked Leo and I up and down.

"Hello, Devon." Leo shook the man's hand. The man regarded the gesture as if Leo had given him a bag of dog shit.

"Leo. How's things?" Devon said.

"As well as expected, Devon, in these troubling times. How's things for you? You're opening gig. Go well?"

Devon laughed. "Yeah, Leo. It was a gas, man."

Incensed that Leo was talking to her friend, Irene stepped into the conversation.

"And who is this, Leo?"

"Devon, Irene, this is Richard Cole. He is looking into uh Bobby's death."

"Still regulating the company's interests, I see," Irene said.

"Oh, yes." Leo gave a brief smile. "Always, Irene. Always."

"In order to find out who killed your husband, Mrs. Clarke," I said. She snapped her head toward me, slowly removing her sunglasses. "I'll have to ask some hard questions."

Irene frowned.

"That shit ain't going to bother me, Jack!"

"You don't seem too broken up about your husband's death," I said.

Leo tugged at my shirt sleeve. I pulled away.

"How am I supposed to act, Mr. Cole? You're an authority on women's emotions. A black woman's emotions. Believe me, I have shed enough tears over Bobby Clarke."

"He wasn't a good husband?" I asked. She glanced at Devon. Devon looked embarrassed. Leo definitely was embarrassed. More than that, he was pissed at me, and his darting eyes let me know it. "In your opinion," I added.

"My opinion don't mean a hill of beans, boy," Irene said. "Bobby Clarke as a good husband that would be fact. A good provider? Of course," she cackled. "Look at this place! The cars, the money. The toys." She glanced at Devon. Again, the young man looked embarrassed. Enough so, he turned his back on all of us. "He spends—spent time with Cissy and Lamar. Sure. Me? He ignores—ignored me. Unless he needed to keep me in check over my spending."

"You two fought a lot, I gather."

"Dick " Leo protested.

"No, Leo." Irene touched his arm. "It's all right. Let the detective ask his hard questions." She paused. "Yes. We fight—fought constantly. Shit, you name a day of the week and we'll—we'd argue about that." Irene stopped, caught herself becoming overcome with diverse sets of emotions. The tears flooded her dark brown eyes and the mascara ran immediately. "I loved him," she said as Leo took her into his comforting arms.

Devon was antsy. He didn't know what to do. So early in his life he wasn't equipped just yet how to handle another human being's grief.

"We're sorry we upset you, Irene." Leo helped her move away from him, handed her his handkerchief.

"No," she sobbed. After she dabbed her eyes, she handed Leo the handkerchief. He examined the white cloth stained with black mascara, smiling faintly at Irene. She stepped quickly to the house. "It's fine. I need to get this out. Let's get out of the heat."

Irene took us to a sitting room furnished with all new furniture still covered in plastic. On the mantle sat Clarke's gold record awards. She had Devon make everyone drinks from the wet bar. Leo and I sat on the larger sofa, while Irene perched herself on the loveseat. Devon would join her after he served the drinks.

"Sit down," she ordered. "This is the first time anyone has used the room since we changed out the furniture."

He served us all Cokes with a splash of gin. I barely drank mine. Irene didn't like that.

"Something wrong with your drink?" She asked.

Leo spoke up.

"Oh, no, Irene. Dick doesn't drink."

"What are you, a choir boy?" Devon said and howled with laughter. Irene grabbed his knee and squeezed.

"I'm a recovering alcoholic," I said abruptly.

They stared at me as if I just confessed to being the love child of Bigfoot.

"Well," Irene said coldly, "I wouldn't want to disrupt your sobriety."

"I appreciate that."

"Devon can fix you a Coke with ice."

Devon got to his feet and made his way to the wet bar.

"No," I said. "I don't need anything except to get this visit over with. It's been part hostile and part poor, poor pitiful me. Now I'd like some fucking facts. If that isn't rude enough, I can ask some friends in the Rockford County Police Department to talk to you. They wanted to talk to you. Leo persuaded them to let me handle it."

Devon turned on his heels, sashayed to me, and tried to act tough. He placed his fists on his hips and stuck his chest out.

"Irene don't need anyone coming in her house and throwing his weight around," he said.

Leo was the only one in the room who was terrified.

"Sit down, Devon," Irene ordered. He did as he was told like a good boy toy.

Several moments passed before anything was said. The tension in the room was like muck in a swamp.

"Mrs. Clarke."

"Yes, Mr. Cole?" Irene answered in a monotone voice.

"Where were you on August 3rd?"

"Here, Mr. Cole. Until seven-thirty. I had to wait for the babysitter."

"Why did you need a babysitter?"

"I had a date," she said and sniffed.

"With who?"

Irene raised her eyebrows. "Does it matter?"

"It does," I said. "I need to narrow down who might be involved in your husband's death."

"That woman shot him." Irene's voice was shrill. She made a face when she realized the tone, cleared her throat and repeated the statement. "That woman shot and killed Bobby. What else is there to know? Why go further?"

"Dick," Leo said, shaking his head.

"Yes, Leo," I told him. "Mrs. Clarke needs to know more."

"I don't think that is necessary," Leo said.

"Tell me," Irene looked concerned.

I took a deep breath and dove into it.

"I viewed your husband's body. He wasn't just shot to death, Mrs. Clarke. He was severely beaten. His head nearly severed from his neck."

Irene Clarke burst into tears again. Devon ran to her side to comfort her once more. Leo looked uncomfortable and wished he was fly fishing in Oregon with his brother. I wasn't moved by her performance. I stayed silent. Decided not to push the situation any further. Not to be delicate or heavy-handed. Let it lie.

"Tell him what we found out," Devon said when Irene got herself together.

Leo woke up from his daydream and sat forward. "Yes," he grunted. "You must tell us, Irene."

A sniffle here, a sniffle there and the old Iron Gate came clamoring down to show us how strong she was.

"Alan Kohl plans to steal the entire music catalog from us," she said flatly.

"How do you know?" Leo asked.

"Mary Fuller called me. She is Bobby's secretary. She files copyright paperwork for all the songs Bobby writes. Kohl came in the office one day and demanded to see all the copyrights. She refused. A month later, the office was robbed. The top part of the file cabinet was missing."

"That was where the copyrights were?" I asked.

"Yes."

"What proof do you have Kohl is behind the robbery?"

She inhaled and exhaled sharply.

"He's also helped Bobby set up his own production company. After Mary called, I was suspicious. I went to the office and Mary and I went over the production company paperwork. Something looked fishy. A clause about an offshore company, actually many companies that he told Bobby he owned."

"Shelter companies," Leo said. "Yes. Reliant has many shelter companies."

"Since you're here " Irene jumped from the loveseat and pranced out of the room. Several minutes later she returned with some documents. She handed them to Leo. "Look at clause 4.8."

Leo did. His jaw dropped. "Essentially Alan Kohl owns Quimby productions. Bobby doesn't own a thing!" Leo gasped. "I-I can't believe he would sign such a document."

"I can," Devon said.

"Why do you say that?" I asked him.

"I love the man, dearly, like a brother. But, damn, he was the thickest person when it came to contracts. He signed on last year for the Blueberry festival in Boston. Contract stated he and the band had to play for two hours. We stopped just short of that and the tour manager found out we wouldn't get paid. Only reason we got our money was Alan Kohl sent some guys to strong-arm him. He's been burned by producers past two years. Two of them worked for Kohl. Bobby's mind wasn't all there."

I said, "Is that so? He had more artistic sense than business."

Devon continued. "If you say so, Mr. Cole. I joined Bobby's band in '72. He was okay then. His mind started to go soon after. Ranting, raving. Screaming at people for small things. Freddy, our drummer quit

because Bobby put his foot in Freddy's kick drum. He screamed at a waiter in a restaurant about the silverware being placed upside down. We got kicked out and Bobby started sobbing on the street. I had to lead him back to the bus."

"Have you noticed anything, Mrs. Clarke?" I said to Irene.

She nodded. "Why do you think the children live with my mother?"

I shrugged. "I didn't know that."

"Last year Bobby chased them with a bow and arrow. Saying he was going to rid himself of all the shadow people. What the hell does that mean?"

"Was he a drug user, Devon?"

He chuckled. "No. Other than a little pot now and then, not at all. Bobby didn't drink much either. He always said he wanted to be aware. Had to see things as they were to write his songs."

"Hey, was that folk singer Billy Crabb you were talking to when Leo and I came in?"

Devon and Irene had funny looks on their faces.

"Yeah," Devon said. His demeanor had changed. He was back to the cold glare and evasive tone in his voice.

"I saw him open for Led Zeppelin a few nights ago," I said. "I liked him. The audience didn't, though."

"I'm playing guitar on his record. Kohl called me and asked if I'd play on Billy's stuff. We been hanging out."

"He's a nice guy," Irene said. I felt something in that statement. I got the feeling Irene was a busy lady with anyone connected to Bobby Clarke.

"Well," Leo got to his feet in a ballet-like sweep. "I hate to cut this short but I have other business to attend to." Devon and Irene stood. Leo went to her, gave a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. "I'm very sorry about Bobby. He was a great man."

"Yes," was all she could manage. "Thank you for coming, Leo." Irene accepted a handshake from me. She said, "You will keep me updated?"

"I will. I may come back. Ask you both more questions."

She nodded. "Of course. Devon will walk you both to the door." With that, Irene Clarke turned on her sandal heels and disappeared from the room. Almost in a hurry.

DEVON DIDN'T JUST WALK us to the door, he followed us to the car. We stood in the middle of the Clarkes' driveway chatting just as Leo's driver was chatting up the housekeeper Imelda. Imelda saw us and high-tailed it to the house via the backyard. Leo's driver tossed his cigarette and sprung from the Mercedes' hood where he sat. Leo was tired of playing detective and glared at his two-hundred-dollar shoes.

"I never trusted Alan Kohl," Devon said.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"He's a divider." Devon crossed his arms. "He came to me a few months ago and said he wanted to manage me. I was like, yeah, that would be cool. He set me up with Arlo Records, got the studio booked. All this behind Bobby's back. One day Bobby calls me up and says, 'You fired. Nobody stabs me in the back and gets away with it!' We jawed. Finally I got it out of him that Kohl told him I was planning to sue for my hand in writing those songs."

"Did you write those songs?"

"No," Devon said. "Look, Mr. Cole. He wrote the words and the music, all I did was help develop the arrangements with him. Those were Bobby's songs."

"Alan Kohl is a snake."

Leo stopped looking at his shoes and said: "Is he managing you, Devon?"

Devon gave a sheepish grin. "Nope. I haven't signed a thing. Used him to set up the deals. I signed with Farley and associates. Hell, he manipulated his way into Bobby's life after what happened to Homer Jones."

I jerked my head quickly toward Devon "Who's Homer Jones?"

"Homer owned a local record shop here in Darktown—Um, before it was called Zachery," Leo said, slightly embarrassed at the flub, partly thinking he insulted Devon. Devon paid no mind to the flub. "He also had a show on a radio station in Oklahoma City and broadcast it from his store."

"Yeah. He sold nothing but 'race records' as they used to call it," Devon said. "Homer pretty much discovered Bobby. Bobby ended up outselling everyone Homer carried. Homer managed a lot of those entertainers. One, in particular, was pissed when Homer cut him. The guy's records never sold. Percy Ivey. Ivey came in one night and shot Homer Jones. After that, Bobby was ready to call it quits. Alan Kohl swooped in and stole Bobby's soul."

"Interesting," I said. "Look, I'm not trying to be a jerk, but I have to ask. I need to know your whereabouts the night Bobby died."

Devon nodded. "I was recording. You can check. I was there with a lot of people."

"So you didn't have a date with Irene Clarke?"

Devon laughed. "No." He shook his head. "I don't go out in the public with her. That's reserved for guys of a certain stature in the biz."

"Oh yeah. Do you know who she was out with?"

"Yeah," Devon said. "Alan Kohl."

WE CLIMBED in the Mercedes and the driver put the car in gear. We started out on Rosemont and noticed more people were gathering in the street. I felt a little uneasy, Leo and I exchanged glances. We turned on Norton Ave. past the University. More people hovered together in small groups that seemed to grow as we rolled by. They glared at us, red hot anger burned.

"You were a little rough with Irene, weren't you?" Leo said.

"Not any more than I am with anybody else during questioning," I said.

"I do believe you could have taken more care with her, Dick."

"Do you want the truth or what, Leo?"

He said nothing.

The people in the streets became small mobs. There was an all-female group who started pointing at us as the car passed by. A few links from them three males started taunting us. Leo instructed the driver to speed up slightly as he needed to get home.

"You didn't answer me," I said.

"The investigation has shifted," he said.

"How so?"

"The board members would rather you find the fifteen thousand dollars."

"Do what?" I chuckled.

Leo drew in air sharply. His eyes narrowed.

"They want Rockford County police to solve Bobby Clarke's death. From the looks of it, they think the motel manager shot and killed him. Actually they are certain she did it as they found a .22 in her office that had been fired and gun residue on her hands. Bobby had a .22 slug in his heart. I read the coroner's report a few hours ago."

"That may be a fact she fired the gun. Brenda Lee Hayes did not kill Bobby Clarke. I saw his body, Leo. You heard what I told Irene Clarke! He was beaten to death!"

"Just find the money," he said with a charge of authority. "Those are the orders!"

We fell silent for a bit. The crowds became larger. It was difficult to drive through Zachery. The crowd gathered around the car. People were shouting, taunting. Several times, the driver had to hit the brakes to avoid running over them. Hands smeared the windows. Fists knocked.

Suddenly, those hands started shaking the car.

"What do we do?" Leo shouted.

"What can we do?" I replied.

He ordered the driver to step on it. The driver said he couldn't; there were too many of them. With the car still shaking, the door opened and hands grabbed hold of the driver's arm. He was pulled out of the car and landed on his back. Several shoes caught the driver in the face. Fists came down hard on his head, neck and shoulders.

Leo squealed. I jumped out of the car and ran to the front end, pushing three men away who took turns applying their boots to the driver's ribs. That's when I felt something hard land across my shoulders and neck. I fell face-first on the pavement. The pain surged.

Another blow landed on my lower back. I rolled over and crawled a few links. A huge black man with a two-by-four swung at me. I saw Leo's driver get to his feet and sprint back to the Mercedes. The car sped through the crowd, knocking two men out of the way. The crowd parted and Leo and his driver were gone, headed into the twilight.

Pain surged through my body as I slowly got to my feet. I stood there, weaving, half-blind, as the crowd of angry black people surrounded me holding bricks, baseball bats, and whatever else they found lying around. Windows were broken; buildings were on fire. They shouted irate epitaphs and let the world know they were not happy Bobby Clarke was dead.

Somehow, somehow, my vision still blurry, saw a young woman running on the sidewalk just to the left of the mob. Someone that looked an awful lot like Emily Callum.

I heard loud weeping. It was Emily. Weeping gave way to wailing.

"Emily!" I shouted. "Emily!"

She never looked back. Her ponytail bobbed as she sprinted down the sidewalk, around the corner and out of sight.

I saw her vanish.

Literally vanish.

The weeping and the wailing stopped.

A big man with an even bigger afro swung the baseball bat. I raised my hands to block the blow. I heard the loud whistle of air behind the bat and an even louder cracking of bones as the hard wood slammed against my left shoulder. Tears welled up in my eyes and I sunk to my knees.

Kicks, fists, bottles, and other blunt objects hit me. The mob screamed, insulted, stated I didn't belong on their side of town.

I heard a shot and out of one blurry eye I saw the mob disperse. Two sets of hands wrangled me from the pavement, and before I knew

it, I was thrown in the backseat of a car. The car sped off.

I was on the floorboard of a Lincoln looking up at Moses Upstart and Dr. Samuel Bridgewater, president of Zachery College. They were not happy to see me.

“Oh, hey, Moses,” I said nervously. “Look I know I’m not supposed to be in Zachery—”

That was when his foot met my face with one swift kick. I was out like a light.

THERE I WAS on the carpeted floor of a very large room in a very large house.

Moses sat in a wicker rocker and Bridgewater sat on a loveseat. Both of them were enjoying scotch, talking quietly when they noticed I was conscious. A gold bracelet hung from Bridgewater's wrist loosely, sparkling in the light. Moses had been smiling, his demeanor changed when I raised up to a sitting position. A stone-faced expression abruptly wrangled his face. He jumped from the rocker ready to pounce on me.

"No, no." Bridgewater held a hand up. "Leave him be. No more violence this evening."

"You sure, Sammy? I can crack this chump's head open " Moses adjusted his tie, tugged at the waistband of his trousers, and stuck his chest out like the macho man he was.

"Yes, I'm very sure, Moses. Violence is not welcome in my home."

"Thank you," I said.

"Yeah," Moses went back to the wicker rocker. He sat elegantly, took a sip of brandy from his tumbler. "Better thank Sammy, or you'd be an accordion right now."

Wobbly I stood, thanked Sammy and suggested I should be on my way. A smirk crossed Moses' ridged face.

"No sir—ee!" He shrieked with laughter. "This two-bit Jim Rockford fake thinks he can just smile, nod, and ride off into the sunset? Ain't gonna happen, turkey."

"Look, Moses," I started, still trying to be friendly, but one of the many things that rankle me is being leaned on and being held against my will. "Whatever I did, I'm sorry."

"Bull—shit, mother fucker!" Moses raised his voice which carried all over the house. "You know what you did. Carella is in the slammer because of you."

"Nobody told your brother to get involved with an insurance scam," I told him.

"You only investigated the crime because your bosses own the jewelry store and the company that insured it." Moses pointed a crooked finger at me."

"You mother shoulda told you boys crime doesn't pay."

He advanced on me quickly, both hands bawled up into tight fists, bodily harm was most definitely his intent. Dr. Bridgewater intervened, grabbing Moses by the arm.

"I said no violence in my house!" Bridgewater yelled.

Moses relented. He stood there, glaring at me fuming. "This clown ain't supposed to be on this side of Odarko any damn way! The rest of the boys in the Connection finds out, he ain't going home for Christmas—ever!"

The Connection is a loose affiliation of crime bosses who run territories in Zachery after Kelpy Morris was gunned down in nineteen sixty-seven. Harlot Williams and her boys decided to consolidate the already too many bosses and form a solidarity often referred to as the Connection. You had to be connected to operate or live in Zachery. Not knowing the cases I took on past few years, I've stuck my finger in their shit way too many times.

I was no longer welcome in Zachery unless Ajax was my guide and protector.

Convinced he'd diffused the situation, Bridgewater smiled, patted Moses on the back, and offered the wicker rocker for him to sit. He poured another tumbler of scotch and forced it into his hand.

"They won't find out, now will they, Moses?" Bridgewater said. He turned to me, smiled hugely, and carried on, patient with his words. "If Mr. Cole will help us. Right, Moses?"

Moses took a few seconds to acknowledge the deal, and only with a nod.

"Help you?" I asked.

"Please." Bridgewater motioned for me to sit in a white leather chair.

I did so, with reservations. Really, I just wanted to get the hell out of there, the hell out of Zachery. My whole body ached. I wasn't in the mood to be squeezed for information. Dr. Bridgewater brought me a tumbler of scotch. The man smiled way too much.

"Yes, Mr. Cole. We need your help," he went on after he sat. "I'm sure you are more than willing to help us with a matter of concern to me, and of course Moses."

"Depends on what it is," I answered gruffly, sipping my scotch slowly.

Moses glared at me. He was thinking of past times, our run-ins, the times when Shep ran him out of Odarko, how he was so pissed that he wasn't allowed to run me out of Zachery.

"You've been investigating Bobby Clarke's death," Bridgewater said.

Here we go, I thought. First the bribery, then the threats.

I nodded.

"Even before the public knew he was dead," he continued. I continued to drink his scotch. Moses continued glaring at me. "This, of course, is in the interest of Reliant, am I correct?"

I said nothing.

"Ah," Bridgewater laughed. "Unflappable!" he declared. "Isn't he, Moses?" Moses was silent too. Still, he kept those cold dark eyes on me. "Honorable. It's a breath of fresh air to meet someone who doesn't fold under any circumstance."

"What do you want?" I brashly said.

"All right. I'll get to the point. I want that statue," Bridgewater said.

"What statue?"

"You know what statue we're talking about, mother fucker!" Moses pointed his fingers at me, emulating a gun. "My boys saw you with it coming out of the laundry place!"

Bridgewater held up his hand and Moses went back to the cold stare.

"That statue is very important to us," Bridgewater said. "To my organization. To the school. To the world."

"False idol isn't it, Dr. Bridgewater?"

"Idols rule, Mr. Cole. This country was founded on idols. Money. Power. Sex. Religion. We worship the almighty green dollar by placing our idol's faces on coins and paper. Billboards and commercials with faces of gods and goddesses selling us products we really do not need."

"I thought your religion debases false gods."

"My religion?" Bridgewater laughed. "You think I am follower of Christ because I am a leader in the black community?"

"Well." I struggled to dig myself out that hole my mouth so easily dropped me in. "I knew you were a follower of Allah—"

"No, Mr. Cole." Bridgewater beamed, wagged a finger. "That's where you are wrong. I brought the statue here to Oklahoma. I was studying archeology in the field of ancient religions. In nineteen fifty-three I went to France. I had been a lifelong atheist, Mr. Cole. The day I saw the Object, I knew God existed. He," Bridgewater smiled hugely with a

finger pointed upwards, "was not of this world, as was the Object. It spoke to me. Told me secrets no man could know. Gave me powers," Bridgewater tapped the temple of his forehead, "of the mind over the body and others' minds."

"If you have the power of the mind, Dr. Bridgewater, then you know what I know, and you know where the statue is," I said.

Bridgewater chuckled. "I don't need to read your mind to know the Object is in the hands of Reliant, your employers."

Dr. Bridgewater," I started, took a sip. "Can you explain to me the hierarchy of humans in the eyes of God?"

"Changing the subject, are we? Sounds like you already know about it, Mr. Cole," he said.

"I'd like to hear it again. Make sure I understand it."

"The hierarchy of humans in the eyes of God is divided by race, gender and intelligence. The idea of a white man as the top of the food chain is a modern concept. Through years and years of ignorance, the white man believes he is the center of the world, when in fact, he is a doggerel. Generational defects. He is, in fact, last on the totem pole. After the white woman and the mentally incapacitated beings. The new beings have plans for the white man. Of course, all that will happen after the next apocalypse."

Silence filled the room. I stared at my glass, but I felt Moses' eyes on me and the not-so-warm smile of Dr. Bridgewater.

"You believe that, huh?" I asked. "Wouldn't the government consider that hate speech?"

"No more than the racist Hollywood films that fill the minds of the ignorant every year," Bridgewater said, that smile never faded away. Anger never filled his eyes. "Where is the Object, Mr. Cole?"

"When's the apocalypse?"

"Nineteen eighty-two," Bridgewater chuckled. "Everyone knows that. Bring us the Object, Mr. Cole."

"Or what, Dr. Bridgewater?"

He shook his head, flashing those immaculately perfect white teeth. "No, Mr. Cole. I do not threaten."

Moses jumped to his feet and was on me with lightning speed. He knocked the glass out of my hand with a swipe of his left and grasped my shirt lapels with his right hand. I was lifted up in the air to meet his angry red eyes.

"I make promises," Bridgewater stated.

"YOU'RE lucky I was diving by," I heard Ajax say.

"What's going on?"

"A full-scale riot. What are you doing lying in the street?"

"Zachery hasn't had a riot in ten years."

"Look for yourself," Ajax said.

"What are you doing lying in the street, broken and bloodied?" Ajax repeated the question.

I rose up from the backseat of Ajax's Barracuda as much as I could before the pain in my bruised and broken body knocked me back down. The city was on fire. Several buildings burned bright, smoke rising to the sky. People sprinted from electronic shops carrying TVs and stereo equipment.

"Moses and Dr. Bridgewater had a heart-to-heart with me," I said.

"I bet you didn't get to say much."

"I did," I touched my aching jaw. "I said too much." Some time passed and nothing was said. I had something I needed to say. "Ajax?"

He glanced at me. "Yeah?"

"I love you."

He laughed. "Man, you getting' sweet on me?"

"No." I felt myself getting emotional. I chewed my bottom lip so I wouldn't stammer. "I love you like a brother."

He glanced at me again; a complex expression crossed his face.

"I know. Where's this coming from?" he asked.

"When we questioned Emily's boyfriend, I said some things—"

Ajax held up his hand.

"Dick, you don't have to explain. I know what you were doing. You were riling him, twisting him up, so you can get more out of him. I knew that. Do me a favor?"

"Yeah, sure. I'd take a bullet for you."

"You don't have to you do have to do this."

"What, then?"

"Don't tell me you love me no more. That shit is weird." Ajax laughed. We were quiet again for a bit. He said: "You see Zachery is on fire. You shoulda stayed in Odarko, my brother."

"I see," I said and slumped back down in the seat. My head was spinning. The pain started in the temple of my head and finished at the tips of my toes. "Where are we going?" I heard myself say, but I didn't have any recollection of saying.

"Taking you to see a doctor friend of mine. Then we're going to finish the task you asked me to do."

"Task?" The pain in my head forced me to close my eyes. "I don't remember asking you to complete a task."

"You'll remember when I show you what's in the trunk."

There was a foreboding element in Ajax's voice. At that time I didn't care. I wanted some medicine to relieve me of my throbbing pain.

We pulled into the driveway of a very nice Cape Cod-style house. It wasn't big, but it didn't need to be. The yard itself was immaculately cared for with large bushes and a couple of eastern redbud trees and a bald cypress the leaves were already turning bronze.

A thin pale-skinned woman with short brown hair was lounging in a gazebo swing on the front porch. Her thin blue dress sprawled all over the wicker, and she seemed to be enjoying the night air. When she saw Ajax and I walking up her drive she rose up, startled. She smiled when she recognized him. It was a smile I knew from Alice. The woman sashayed from the porch, held out her hands to Ajax. He took them, pulled her slightly closer, and kissed her long and hard.

She was pleased with the kiss.

It clicked with me.

I knew her.

I'd seen her in the elevator at the Reliant building. She was with a man and they were arguing something fierce about everything including a divorce lawyer. She and Ajax were more than good friends. For as long as I'd known him, Ajax wasn't much of a womanizer. I thought he was a one-woman man. I guess I was wrong.

Ajax walked her to me, his arm around her waist. "Cindy, this is Dick Cole."

"Nice to meet you." I nodded.

She smiled brightly, shifting those brown eyes back to Ajax. She was so into him it was a little uncomfortable. I got the feeling if I wasn't there and they were not out in the yard, she would have jumped his bones right then and there.

"My friend here is hurt," Ajax said. "Can you patch him up?"

"Oh, Ben," Cindy cooed. "I don't practice that kind of medicine anymore. I work in psychology now."

I recognized her voice. I felt weak in the knees. She was the woman on the phone at the phone booth. She called Ajax Ben. That was odd. Very odd. I didn't want to spoil his fun if he was working an angle, so I didn't contradict Cindy.

"Psychology, huh? Interesting work?" I said. "I didn't catch your last name."

"Trott, I'm Dr. Cindy Trott," she said.

She glanced at me, nodded, and turned her ever-loving gaze back at Ajax.

"Can we come inside?" Ajax asked.

For some reason, I felt anxious. I didn't want to go inside her house.

Cindy took my arm in hers and eased me onto the porch.

"Don't worry, Mr. Cole," she said, smiling and batting her eyes. "Ben wouldn't lead you somewhere dangerous."

THE PHONE CALL woke me at around two a.m.

I jumped upright in the darkness and grabbed the phone on the second ring.

"Yeah?"

The voice on the other end breathed heavily, waiting before he answered.

"You have to help me," he said.

"Look," I told him. "I don't even know who you are!"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I know you're Richard Cole. You work as a private investigator for Reliant Incorporated. You have a girlfriend named Alice. You're working on the murder of Bobby Clarke."

"How the hell do you know that?" I said bitterly.

"It doesn't matter," the man on the telephone said. "You have to help me."

"I'm a little tired of this game."

"So am I."

"Then stop playing it."

"It's not as easy as you think it is."

"I don't believe you," I said. "I think you like to play mind games."

"Please " I heard his voice break. Sobs followed, small, short hiccups. After a while, he gained control again. Not much, just enough to speak. "These last seven years have been pure misery."

"I'm all broken up," I said.

"You would have more sympathy if you knew what was really going on."

"Boo-hoo," I said.

"You are a cold, unfeeling person."

"I am when I'm fed up."

Neither of us said anything for a bit. He wanted to. He was champing at the bit to spill his guts. I was tired, not just of not having enough sleep, but everything. Alice and I had a fight that evening and never went to dinner. Leo is shoving me off the case. He hasn't exactly said, just find the money. I know in the next few days he'll call and say, "Uh, Dick. This is Leo. Look, don't worry about the Bobby Clarke case. The money is as good as gone. I have something else for you "

Yeah. I'm fed up.

Fed up with him. Fed up with Reliant. Fed up with how they control everything. Fed up with Odarko and its ghosts haunting every corner.

I wondered if I could convince Alice to leave this Godforsaken place. Where could we go?

The man on the phone had a gruff voice, which took me out of that daydream.

"Those poor people all those poor people in town "

"Stop it, will ya? Jesus you're a broken record. Just fucking tell me what you did to all the people of Odarko, huh?!"

Complete silence.

"Not on the phone," the man finally said.

"You've said that before," I said. "I'm beginning to think you're just a nut. You aren't going to tell me anything."

"I will!" The man sounded like the accusation was a hurtful lie. "And I am not a nut, Cole. I truly need your help. I'm just frightened."

I sat up in bed.

"Why are you frightened?"

"They're after me," he said.

"Who? Who is after you?"

"Strange beings," he said.

I stifled a chuckle. "What makes you think that?"

"I see shadows hovering in doorways, on street corners, cobbled walkways. It's not paranoia. Although I've been told that is the problem." He paused. "There's this God sound a clicking noise turns into a droning sound like static "

"You don't think you're imagining this," I said.

"No. I see them sometimes I see them as blots or wiggle figures."

"Look," I yawned, "I need to get some sleep—"

"I have that thing!" he screamed. I heard sobbing, and faintly, "The Obelisk. The Object whatever you call it. I have it. Come and take it from me please."

"How did you know I was looking for it?" I asked.

Silence.

"Hello?"

Still silence.

There was a clicking on the other end, white noise, a voice coming in and out. Suddenly the man's voice was crystal clear. He blurted out a place he'd meet me. Then hung up.

I COULDN'T GO BACK to sleep. I must've laid there for hours, just thinking. Every hour I would check the clock. A little later I went to the living room and turned the TV on. The late show was about to go off and soon the TV station would too. Some weird flying saucer movie was on. A tall woman in a sequined green body stocking laid out the entire plan to an actor with one glum facial expression. She talked for the longest time explaining how inferior humans were to her people and how the Object would destroy all of mankind.

I nearly fell out of my chair.

What the hell?

The actress was holding the Obelisk in her hands. It glowed red, pulsating. A beam of light shot from the Obelisk right into the man's forehead. He passed out on the floor. The film cut to a crowd of people with their hands raised in Nazi fashion, a blank look on their faces. The tall woman gave a speech about no individuals, only one train of thought. How humans were now conquered, and all mankind will obey every command.

Commercials invaded the movie. One for Legtricity pantyhose. The actress, who I recognize as former stripper Samantha Silk, danced around

with thirty other scantily clad dancers in top hats and one-piece skirts that rode up to show they were all wearing nude pantyhose.

Another commercial was a promo for the *Rockford Files*. Jim and Angel are being chased by mobsters. Angel pleads with Jim that they are friends and he is innocent. A gangster threatens Rockford, quick cut of Rockford throwing punches. The promo adds *Rockford Files* airs 9 pm on Fridays on NBC.

The film comes back. Cut to the hero of the film lying on the floor. Close-up of his face. A voice-over fades in. He explains how that laser light from the Object could not brainwash him into a zombie. Instead, the laser is eating away at his brain little by little.

The movie ends.

I went back to bed and thought of what I had watched on TV, nonstop.

I got up at around six-thirty, dressed, got in my Javelin, and drove to the Owl for breakfast. The sun was just coming up. As I pulled into a parking spot at the diner, a naked man sprinted in front of my car. I hit the brakes just in time, barely bumping him. I jumped out of the Javelin and hurried to see if I'd actually hurt the man.

"Holy shit!" I screamed. "Are you all right?"

The man lay on the pavement, facedown. I heard a roar of laughter rise out of his wheezing lungs, followed by a violent coughing fit.

"I'm all right," he said sporadically between guffaws and coughs. "I'm all right, yes, I'm fine." When he rose, I saw the man was Reverend Keyes. "Oh! It's you, Mr. Cole!" He laughed wildly.

I immediately threw my hands to cover my eyes. Seeing a man of cloth completely naked can have that effect on you.

"Reverend Keyes what the hell I mean, why are you out here in public naked?"

"Catching the sunrays," Keyes said.

"Naked?"

"How else will the body absorb the sun in all its glory?"

"I suppose that's a good point. If you've become a nudist, shouldn't you be at a nudist colony?"

"I'm not a nudist, Mr. Cole," Keyes said. "I'm a naturalist."

"Is there any way you put some clothes on, Reverend?"

"I'm also not a Reverend," he laughed again. "I've given that up."

"Can you put some clothes on?"

"No," Keyes laughed. "They're at my house. And I'm definitely too tired to jog back two miles and jog back here to get breakfast. Speaking of which." He ambled over, threw his arms around my shoulders. "Let's get some."

Keyes gently nudged me toward the diner. I started to resist, realized I couldn't, and went with it. "Doesn't Bernice have a rule about eating naked in her restaurant?" I said.

"No." Keyes laughed, opened the door and ushered me inside. "I do this all the time."

Only two patrons occupied the diner. The only one working there was Ta Sheridan, Bernice's ex-husband. He was short with hair longer than his body pulled up in a bun on top of his head, resembling a Japanese shogun warrior. He wore blue jeans and cowboy boots almost exclusively. For some reason he was wearing furry bedroom slippers. A white apron covered his Waylon Jennings T-shirt, and I noticed his Fu Manchu mustache was waxed and the left tip pointed down, the right tip pointed up.

Ta and Bernice broke up long before Shep came into the picture. He left her and the diner to try his hand at being a country singer, with

limited success. He did, however, open for Willie Nelson and the Flying Burrito Brothers, and shared a festival stage with Townes Van Zandt. His career, or what little of it, was derailed when he was busted for carrying a small amount of marijuana when he passed back through Oklahoma. Shep and Reliant had a lot to do with diminished jail time served of six months.

Ta filled coffee for an older black man I would see wander in from time to time. I remembered Bernice said he was from Rockford County. I've wanted to have a chat with him; only, I felt I might jar the already nervous old man. The other patrons were a man and a woman, obviously getting breakfast after spending the night together. Both disheveled man and woman were wearing each other's tops and couldn't keep their hands off each other. I have to say, the frilly blue blouse he wore went with his eyes.

Ta came over and poured two cups of coffee.

"What happened to your boots, Ta?" I asked.

He looked solemn, clucked his tongue and shook his head slowly. "Craziest thing, Dick," he said. "I woke up at two in the morning yesterday in old man Garret's farm, standing ankle-deep in cow shit. No socks, no boots. I have no idea how I got there or where my damn boots are. I didn't stick around to ask either. You know Garret is awful fond of shooting at people."

"He brought his shotgun to church once," Keyes said. "He wanted me to bless it."

"He's definitely an odd one," I said.

We gave Ta our order. I went for the breakfast sampler, eggs, toast, bacon, sausage. Keyes ordered one hardboiled egg. That was it. Ta gave him funny looks as he walked away. Keyes smiled back. Not that a naked man in your restaurant is strange but he ordered one hardboiled egg. Go figure.

"Now that you aren't the town preacher, where are you staying?" I asked.

"I'm still at the church." He sipped his coffee.

"Oh, I see. Mr. Keyes, how can you still live at the church if you aren't the reverend anymore? Wouldn't the Church council ask you to leave?"

"I haven't told them yet," he said, drank down his steaming hot coffee and winced.

"When did you make this decision?" I asked.

"Eight-oh-five in the evening, two days ago. Say, you remember that scratching that I kept hearing in the Church basement?"

"Yes," I told him. "I remember. When do you plan on telling them?"

"Sunday at sermon. Yeah, that scratching, I found out what it was."

"You're just going to spring it on everyone in the middle of a sermon?"

"Yes. I'm also handing a check. I'm buying the church. I finally got enough nerve to investigate that scratching that had been bugging me for months!"

I sighed. Massaged my temples with my fingers.

"Reverend—Mr. Keyes, why would you buy the church if you are no longer the reverend?"

"Because of I've converted, Mr. Cole," Keyes said joyfully.

"Converted to what? Judaism? Buddhism? Mormonism?"

"Doesn't have a name yet."

"How can you—?"

"That's what I'm leading up to. Haven't you been listening?"

Dismayed, I waved my hand. "No, I suppose not."

Ta brought us our food. He sat down a plate in front of Keyes who dug immediately, not giving Ta enough time to remove his hands from

the plate. Ta sat my plate down quickly, in fear I was as ravenous as Keyes.

"You guys all set?" Ta asked.

I nodded and Keyes mumbled, spat bits of chewed food everywhere. He finished chewing and watched me eat some eggs. He leaned in, looking around to see if anyone was listening. He didn't take into account they would be staring because of his nudeness, not what he was whispering about.

"I went to the basement. For months, I was afraid to go down there. I prayed for God to give me strength, but I still could not put my cowardice on the back burner, be a man, and look. After all, it was only scratching. A few days ago, I couldn't take it. I didn't care if it was rats or possums, or anything. I went down those wooden steps into that dank and dark basement."

We glared at each other for a bit. He had that dumb, goofy, overjoyed, smile on his face, and me with that curmudgeon, contentious frown.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well what?" he answered back.

"What did you find in the basement?"

He shrugged, continued eating.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means I can't tell you," he said, drank some coffee.

"You can't tell me. Such bullshit," I said. "Why can't you tell me?"

He gave me a disappointed look. Keyes expected me to just accept his answer and go away.

"I can't tell anyone because that's going to be the basis of my faith. Not to tell my truth, but I want others to seek their truth."

"And tell you," I said.

"No," he shook his head. "To inspire others to find their truth."

"Too complicated, Mr. Keyes."

He laughed.

"Not at all, brother. Not at all," he touched his forehead with his fork. "Keep it simple up here is the trick or you'll go crazy." He waited, then said, "Okay. I'll tell you a little bit. What I found " he surveyed the diner, slowly back at me. "A living, breathing statue. Pulsating like a human heart. The weird thing is: all the secrets that statue whispered to me."

Keyes laughed maniacally, stifled it by placing a hand over his mouth. Everyone in the diner stopped what they were doing and looked at Keyes. Seconds passed and they went back to eating.

He leaned in, raised his eyebrows. "Huh, whadda' you think?"

I smiled politely and said, "That's a helluva thing to drop on someone."

"Ain't it?" Keyes said excitedly.

"I was too closed up in my heart," he pointed to his bare chest. "And in here," he pointed to his head. "To hear what it had to say. Now I am ready to share the truth and have others share their truth. How about you, Mr. Cole?"

"What about me?"

"Are you willing to share your truth?"

I shook my head.

"Nope," I said. "Just lies."

He glared at me and burst into that maniacal laugh again.

"You're a card."

"So I've been told. Are you worried that people will think you're "

"Crazy?" Keyes finished my sentence. "They already do, and have in the past. I was a quarterback at Texas A & M, Mr. Cole. Everyone thought I'd turn pro. I said God was calling me. They thought I was crazy. Anything out of the norm." Keyes' eyes widened. He made tiny

circles in the air and whistled like a creepy Theremin. “We’re all nuts anyway,” he chuckled.

“What’s he doing in my diner?” I heard Bernice screech.

Everyone turned their gaze to her. She was in an overcoat, her hot pink waitress outfit and wearing sneakers on and already tired, aching feet. Her purse was the size of a Jackie Gleason. The scowl on her face was written in stone. I’m not sure if I’ve ever seen the woman smile.

“The Reverend?” Ta asked.

“No!” she screamed. “Him! Richard Cole! I told you I don’t want him—I don’t want you in my diner! After what I saw you do—get out! Get out!”

I tried to argue. Halfway through I realized I couldn’t talk it out with her. Whatever she saw me do, she was done with me.

Oh well.

I WENT to see Mary Fuller, Bobby Clarke's secretary. She was a very nice-looking blonde-haired woman in her early fifties. At one time she was a great beauty. Now her face showed a lot of signs of worry, wear and tear on skin that she did not take much care of. She may have given up altogether on trying to spruce herself up as far as makeup goes. She still dressed very nice, clad in an off-the-shoulder green dress, open-toed heels, and black hosiery.

Mary had been filing things when I stepped through the threshold. She turned quickly to face me when I called her name. She smiled hugely at me, perfect white teeth. Her horn-rimmed glasses kept sliding down the bridge of her nose as she spoke, and she took great trouble to keep fixing the glasses back in their rightful place.

"Yes?" she said in a voice delighted to be addressed. Whether it was fake or genuine I couldn't tell.

"I'm Richard Cole," I said. "I'm investigating the death of Bobby Clarke."

"I see," Mary said. "You too."

"Me too?"

"Sheriff Doyle of Rockford County was here earlier, and Mr. Kohl was here. He has left for lunch. I was told you might come by."

"Is that right?" I quipped.

"Mhmm," she smirked at me. "They both said not to answer any of your questions. Mind you, they were not in each other's presence when they told me this, actually ordered me, not to answer your questions."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes."

"Do you always do as you are told, Miss Fuller?"

She chuckled, gave me a side look. "Almost never, Mr. Cole."

"Good. Then I can ask some questions?"

Mary placed a hand on my shirt sleeve and stroked seductively. "Young man, you can ask me all the questions in the world."

I was amused. I grinned at her and played up her pass. "So can I call you Mary?"

"Darling," she moved her hand down my arm, past my wrist and took my hand into hers. "You can call me anything you like as we are in your bed."

"That may happen," I moved closer to her. "But first I need to do a little work."

"Work before pleasure, I see. As long as pleasure comes."

I had to laugh at that. I felt as if I was in a bad porno book written by horny teenagers. Or worse: one of those Godawful blue films that have become chic all of a sudden.

She went to her desk, turned to me and let those horn-rimmed glasses slide down the bridge of her nose. Her huge green eyes sparkled. She took a Brooks lounge chair that had been in front of her desk and pulled it to the right side. She patted the leather seat and wiggled her finger at me. I noticed some strange items on her desk beside her typewriter. A box of table salt, a sewing needle and thread.

"Come sit beside me " Mary said in a low husky voice. I figured she simulating Lauren Bacall or Henry Kissinger.

Reluctantly I moved slowly to the chair. I looked around to see if anyone was watching. No one was around. Still, I was paranoid someone was lurking around the corners filming me. I flashed a plastic smile and eased into the chair.

"So, was Bobby Clarke a good boss?"

She gasped. Touched her slightly wrinkled neck as if I threatened to choke her. "Why yes," she said in a breathy voice. "Bobby and I had become very close over the past six years I've worked for him. When an album or single has done well, he's given me bonuses. Even this watch."

She lifted her arm up in my face to show a gold band attached to a Timex watch. It was nice. Very nice.

"Nice guy."

"Oh, a wonderful man. Very intelligent. Good looking."

"Did uh you and Bobby ever ?" I let the sentence and the implication trail off, settle into the ether.

Mary waited to answer. She thought about it, batted her eyes, and blushed slightly.

"No," she said. "Oh, I would have. Definitely," she sighed, dropped her hand from her neck to her right breast, brushed it before resting it in her lap. "He didn't like anyone his own age."

"Oh. Is that so?"

"Mm, Mr. Cole. He barely likes his own wife. She's only thirty. Bobby liked them younger," and in leaned in," Mary said in a hushed whisper, "younger, whiter and blonde."

I nodded.

"What do you think of Alan Kohl?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Crook!" she exclaimed.

"Bobby didn't think so," I said.

"Bobby was blind to the man. He could no wrong in Bobby's eyes. He liked him because he audited SAX records and got Bobby all the royalties

he was owed for ten years."

"Mary?"

"Yes, Mr. Cole?"

"Call me Dick."

She smiled salaciously. "Okay," she said slowly. "Dick." She enunciated my name, let it roll off her tongue like a Swedish nurse in a French erotic movie.

"Now," I said as I leaned in. She too leaned in and our faces were inches apart. "This is all hush hush."

"I won't tell a soul."

"I heard Alan Kohl has tried to steal the copyright on Bobby's songs."

"Yes," Mary whispered. "That is true."

"What stopped him?"

"Not a what, Dick. A who."

I raised an eyebrow. "Who stopped him, Mary?"

She smirked, tilted her head in an overconfident way. "I did," she licked her lips.

"You did."

"Uh-huh."

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"I placed liquid white over his name on all the forms and typed Bobby's name."

I laughed. "That worked?"

"Of course."

"Very clever, Mary."

"Yes. I am. My mother always told me I was too clever for my own good," she said.

"I bet Kohl blew his top when he found out."

"He doesn't know yet." Mary covered her mouth as she giggled.

"What do you make of Bobby's wife?"

Sharp intake of breaths, a glare averted to the photograph of former president Nixon with a mustache and beard drawn on, a penis also drawn at his mouth.

"Ah," I said. "That look on your face says it all."

"Bobby could've done better than that gold digger," Mary said. "She was after him since she met him on that photoshoot for Camel's night out record. Broke his marriage up."

"Bobby was married before?"

"Why yes," Mary said. "I thought everyone knew about Dahlia."

I shook my head. "No well not me. No one told me."

"Doesn't surprise me. I think they wanted to keep her out of the picture."

"How do you mean?"

Mary leaned in again, glanced around quickly to make sure no one was around, even though we were alone. "Bobby was a hero of sorts to the black community."

"Okay," I said.

"He helped fund the University here. A university for the black community. Dr. Bridgewater and Bobby are—" Mary corrected herself, a pained expression crossed her face. "Were very close. He is not a big proponent of blacks and whites mixing."

I looked at Mary skeptically. "A racist black man?"

"I no I wouldn't call Dr. Bridgewater a racist. He just doesn't think whites and blacks should mix."

"He does believe in racial equality?"

"No," she said with a smirk. "You haven't been listening to me."

"Well, you haven't said much."

"Dr. Samuel Bridgewater believes white people are the mud people. After all, we all came from Adam, as he has said, and Adam and Eve

were created in Africa. Through multi-generations of inbreeding, white people are the defects of such mixing. Therefore, mud people."

I laughed.

Mary was not happy that I laughed. So I shrugged, faked an embarrassed smile.

"I tend to believe Dr. Bridgewater is a genius and he is right," Mary said with all seriousness. "Bobby believed it as well. And as Dr. Bridgewater has stated, we are in a second Civil War. A race war."

"Uh-huh." I nodded. I was trying my best not to express my feelings on those statements.

"I believe that too," Mary said smugly.

"You believe you are born of inferior race? Mary—"

"Don't try to turn this around!" she shouted.

It startled me. I flinched, held my hands up. "Okay, okay."

"Here." She removed a copy of Jet magazine from her desk drawer and slammed it on top of the desk. The cover featured a serious black man in a three-piece suit and thick glasses staring down a cool, confident bare-chested Bobby Clarke, wearing dark shades, dressed in chains and black jeans, his oiled muscled arms folded. "They talk about how they feel about the current state the race war is in. Bobby is not liking the fact white teenagers buy his records more than black adults."

"He liked their money," I said.

"Everybody likes money," Mary said bitterly. Her smiles and passive-aggressive flirtations disappeared. Now it was the smug, biting conclusion of that "I'm right, and you are wrong" attitude. "Would you turn down money?"

"If I had principles like him. Yes," I said. "Look, no more talk of social consciousness for me. My stomach is full, along with bruised ribs I experienced at the riot yesterday."

"Piggy should've kept his snout out of the other's business."

"Yeah." I shrugged and winked. "Can the really nice and gentle Mary come out and play now? Huh? I'm only here to do a job. Not pass judgement on anyone else. I could care less about their politics or social standing in society. Please let the good Mary come back."

I have to admit, that was a gamble. I didn't know whether or not Mary had dual personalities. She knew it though. Immediately she switched back to the nice, flirtatious Mary who wanted to bed a younger guy. Maybe anybody.

"I'm sorry." She batted her eyes, acted as if she just had an orgasm. A hand rested on her heaving bosom. "When I start talking passionately it's very hard for me to stop. Normally that person I'm speaking to either just leaves or they convert to my beliefs." She giggled.

"You can be very persuasive," I said.

I wanted to be that person who left. But I needed to prod a bit more information from Mary. If she started back up, I thought, I'm going to run like a bat out of hell.

"Let's get back to the former Mrs. Clarke and the current Mrs. Clarke. Do you think Dr. Bridgewater influenced Bobby to divorce Dahlia?"

"I know so. I was at the party where Bobby met Irene Clarke."

"Where was this?"

"Dr. Bridgewater's house."

"Irene was there," I said. It wasn't a question. Mary took it as such.

"Of course. She lived there."

"Was she attached to Bridgewater?"

"Of course." Mary laughed.

"Girlfriend? Wife?"

"No!" She laughed again, a long wheezing laugh with a snort at the end. "Irene is Dr. Bridgewater's daughter!"

"So for the sake of Bobby Clarke's image, he could not remain married Dahlia, a white woman; he marries Dr. Bridgewater's daughter?"

"Yes. I think," again Mary glanced around to make sure we were alone, "this could be interesting to you."

She stood, sashayed to the file cabinet, and withdrew some forms stapled together. She reached far back in the cabinet to retrieve them. Most likely Mary was hiding them. She eased back toward me, and Mary was just tall enough to reach my chest.

The forms were life insurance. To be paid to Irene Clarke. Under that form was another form. A production company formed by Bobby Clarke, Alan Kohl, Irene Clarke and Samael Bridgewater.

I chuckled. "Mary?"

"Yes?" she purred.

"Can I ask you to do two things for me?"

She placed her hands on my chest and gently rubbed. I sighed and chuckled again. Milking every bit of her intention, as long as it didn't go too far.

"I hope I can do more than two," she said.

I chuckled again, this time more nervous than amused. I swear this woman intended to rape me.

"Can you mimeograph these for me?" I handed her the forms. "And can you get me a picture of Dahlia Clarke?"

"Yes." She slid down to her knees, looked up at me. "To get the picture though "

Nothing I could do but close my eyes

An hour later, Mary handed me the mimeograph papers and a picture of Dahlia Clarke.

I knew Dahlia. I knew her well.

Just as I was leaving I met Alan Kohl in the parking lot. He saw me exit Bobby Clarke's office just as he was getting out of his BMW. Billy

Crabb also got out of the car. Dressed in a black T-shirt and dark sunglasses on his face, his disheveled hair looked like barbed wire. The three of us glared at each other. Short, stubby Kohl angrily walked over to me, his check sports coat too small for his frame, and orange/light blue trousers so loud it would cause your eyes to go deaf.

"Hello, Mr. Kohl," I called to him.

"What're you doing here?" Good God, the man never ceased to stop being angry.

"Checking on a tax evasion case," I told him.

He didn't think that joke was too funny.

"Billy Crabb," I said. Crabb checked to see if it wasn't another voice or voices speaking to him. He smiled and waved at me, stumbled away from the Cadillac, followed Kohl's path almost exactly. "I want to tell you gave a great show opening up for Led Zeppelin."

He laughed.

"Thanks. I don't think their audience appreciated the music."

"I disagree," I said. "They were wound-up children. In need of a nap. That's all."

"'Long Gone Dead' I particularly liked. You wrote that yourself?"

"Yes," Crabb said. Kohl was getting antsy. He huffed and puffed, tugged at the sleeves of his sports coat, checked the zipper on those blind drunk trousers. Crabb continued, sounding more like a drunk college professor than a heroin addict ready to doze off. And that's what he tried so hard not to do as he spoke: "I was reading a lot of Southern Gothic stories and the words just poured out of me."

"Must be nice to have all that talent, creativity. I bet you're rolling in the dough."

Crabb chuckled. He and Kohl exchanged uncomfortable glances. I hit a nerve. We were silent for the longest minute of my life until Crabb blurted out:

"You like folk music?"

"Yes. I'm a huge Arlo Guthrie and Tim Buckley fan."

"You are?" Crabb was surprised.

He should have been. I had no idea who Tim Buckley was except Alice owned one of his albums and she cried when she heard he died. She played one song from the album before passing out to sleep. I turned the stereo off and let myself out of the apartment. That was all I knew of singer Tim Buckley.

He slid his dark glasses down slightly and gave me a curious look. "Tim Buckley?" When the sunlight hit his retinas he quickly pushed the glasses back up to protect his gentle blue eyes.

"Enough of this silly talk," Kohl injected himself into our conversation.

"You're right," I nodded. I ruffled the papers in my hands, and Kohl's angry eyes softened a bit, lowered to those papers. "I need to head on to the D.A.'s office anyway."

I left Kohl speechless and Crabb nodding off where he stood.

I went to the Reliant office to see Leo. I wanted to mount my campaign to make him understand burying any evidence in Bobby Clarke's death was a mistake.

I went with Alice. She wanted to introduce me to the guys she worked with at Whizz Comics.

As soon as I hit the door, arm in arm with Alice, Carole came from around her desk. High heels clicked on the linoleum floors. She called out to me. Alice and I whirled around.

"Yeah?"

"Dick I was going to call you. Leo wants to see you in his office."

"Good," I said. "I was coming in to see him. I'll be in a few minutes —"

"He needs you right now," Carole insisted.

I started to tell her I would later, but Alice intervened.

"Go ahead, Dick," she said. "I'll meet you at the Whizz office."

Alice and Carole exchanged flashes of friendly smiles, even though contempt and jealousy were a description of the mood of the moment.

Carole waited until Alice disappeared into a crowd headed into the elevator when she grabbed me by the elbow and whisked me toward Leo's office.

"He needs you real bad, Dick. He's beside himself this morning," Carole said. "He needs someone to talk to."

"Why doesn't he call his wife," I shook her hand away.

Tight-lipped, eyes narrowed, Carole jabbed a finger in my chest.

"You are the only one he trusts right now." Her face loosened. She dredged up that statement on a plate of confusion and immediately corrected herself jovially. "Well," Carole chuckled. "Besides me of course."

She led me into the office, past a skinny elderly man sitting in one of those awful metal chairs that make your back scream "Uncle, I've had enough!" The old man had his homburg on his knee and his face showed more lines than the vertical on a TV with bad reception. He was dressed like a gentleman from the 1900s, only the brown suit he wore had seen better days and the strings at the cuffs of his trousers looked like spider webs.

The old man stood and in a Native American dialect, he said, "Mr. Leo is ready for me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Acorn," Carole said, practically pushing me to Leo's door. "He can't talk right this minute. Can you come back another day?"

The old man nodded. He stood stiffly and placed his homburg on his almond-shaped head.

"I will be back later today. I will go to Stanley drugstore and have soda pop."

Carole smiled and waved with one hand, turned the knob on Leo's door with the other hand.

"Have a good day!" she said to the old man.

The door to Leo's office popped open and Carole shoved me inside, closed the door behind me. The lights were off except one dim lamp on his desk. I could see a shadowy figure sitting at the desk, a trail of blue smoke illuminated by the lamp.

"Leo?"

"I'm glad you could come, Dick."

"I was coming to see you anyway," I said. "Say, why are we in the dark?"

He hesitated to answer. "We're always in the dark, Dick."

I scoffed. "Helluva an answer, Leo."

"Helluva a truth, old boy."

Leo got up from his desk and came toward me. In the warm, soft glow of the lamp, I could see he wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing. That startled me. I moved away from him, fearing he had an erection. But that middle-aged man was not in a state of arousal. He was scared. His body and face twitched something awful.

"Where's your clothes, Leo?"

"I took them off, Dick," he said. "I threw them out the window."

"Why?"

"They were listening."

"Your clothes was listening ? To what, Leo?"

"To me," he said, leaning against the wall wearily. "Us. Any conversation I have with anyone."

I didn't know what to say. Leo has never been one to lose it. He's always kept it together. He is a nervous little man, that much was true. Never have I seen nor heard of Leo being more than a tight ass. He was as stiff as the cardboard box his cornflakes were shipped in.

"Leo." I motioned for him to sit behind his desk again. "Why don't you sit down? I'll get Carole to call your wife."

Leo shook his head, still propped against the wall.

"I don't have a wife anymore," Leo said matter-of-factly. "She left months ago. She had to find herself. She also found a new group of friends who found her as well. She lives in a townhouse that I secretly bought and secretly didn't know about. I also secretly did not know that these friends and my wife like to have sex orgies and film them. I just " He closed his eyes a moment, reopened them. "I hope she's happy."

"I'm sorry, Leo," I said. I didn't know what to say.

Leo was one of my closest friends. I was ready to admit that. Without the work, the money, hell, the care and time he took to help me dry out, I would've been dead already.

For some time we were quiet. He suddenly said:

"In my time of dying, I don't want nobody to moan."

"What?"

"Nothing," Leo said, slightly embarrassed.

"No, Leo, you quoted a song," I said.

"An old song my grandmother used to sing. She was not a nice person. I hated going to her house. My mother and father split up at an early age. I was dropped off constantly while my mother worked two jobs or had a date. Both were interchangeable, the jobs. The dates. One day I realized I'd been at my grandmother's house for a week. So I asked when I was going home. She said, 'Booger, looks like are going to be here until you leave or I do. Your mother has went to live with God and St. Peter.' I remember not crying. My grandmother hated crying."

"Did you?" I asked.

"Did I what?"

"Live with her until she died."

"Yes," he said, thinking of those yesterdays. "She died when I was fourteen. I lived on the streets for a month or so until I worked picking fruit. I lived there for a few months, saved money to rent a room under the Willingham's house and Mr. Willingham put me to work in his stereo shop. From there, I went to college " Leo sighed. "You know the rest."

Actually, I didn't know the rest. I didn't know a lot about Leo. He was so reserved I never thought much about asking him anything. He sure knew a lot about me, though.

"Dick," he said as if it was the first time he'd seen me. "We need to talk." His hushed voice was raspy now.

"Yeah," I said. "Okay."

Leo walked into his bathroom. I heard running water from the faucets.

"Dick?" he called out.

"Yes?" I answered hesitantly.

"Please come here."

"O-o-okay," the stammer came back on me suddenly. I pinched the flesh of my wrist between the nails of my thumb and forefinger to keep that stammer at bay.

I came through the threshold of the bathroom and Leo was huddled at the shower. The shower head was on, and the brazen racket burrowed inside my aching head.

"Leo," I said, still struggling to control the stammer. "Why-why is the water running in the sink and shower?"

"I don't want them to hear me," he said.

"Hear you," I repeated. "Who?"

"The FBI," he said.

"Leo," I told him. "We have discussed a shitload of bad things—legal, illegal, over the years. If they were listening, they would have already arrested us."

He paid me no mind. He went on without a comma, semi-colon, hyphen, or a period to block his way.

"The FBI was in here yesterday interrogating me about Bobby Clarke a bank robbed a few years ago Kohl Stanley Kurtzman Cody Carrol."

I nodded. "That's quite a mouth full. Wait did you say .Cody Carrol?"

"Did I?" Leo shrugged. In an even more hushed voice, Leo said, "He knows everything, Dick."

"Cody Carrol?"

He nodded.

"The FBI is using him to figure out what we did."

"I'm not sure—"

"The money, Dick. The robbery. The murder."

"What murder? What robbery?"

Leo swallowed hard.

"You remember the bank robbery two years ago?"

"Yeah," I said. "The strippers did it. All but one was caught. They shot the sheriff there. Red Stevens."

"Yes," Leo said solemnly. "The FBI has been looking for that money."

"Okay."

"Dick," he raised an eyebrow. "That was the same money I gave Bobby Clarke."

"Shit," I sighed.

"Shit is right, my boy. We're knee-deep in it. I messed up royally. That, um, money, Reliant embezzled."

"The bank was robbed, Leo."

"Yes. We robbed it." He was weak in the knees and used the wall again to steady himself. "We had Kurtzman set up the robberies. All of the banks we dealt in."

"Oh boy," I said. Now I was the one that needed to steady myself by leaning against the wall. A beat passed and I said: "The murder?"

"I don't know who he was. That was not in the plan. I saw the crime photos and "

"It wasn't Kurtzman. Yeah. Reporter Terry Lynn saw Kurtzman in the California Club."

"A little-known secret, my boy, is Kurtzman is running the California Club."

I don't know why I asked this, but something in my brain told me. "Leo?"

"Yes?"

"What's the name of the FBI agents who talked to you?"

He hesitated and said, "Kurt Humner."

"What did he ask you about?"

"He asked about the bank robberies. I told him I didn't know anything more than what had been in the news."

"He didn't believe you?"

Leo shook his head slowly. "He showed me photos of two bills. A fifty and a twenty."

"Okay."

"They were marked. Those were bills from the last robbery."

"A stamp or ?"

"Pen mark: '0078' written on the side of the front and the back. He produced two bills in a plastic bag, evidence bag. Two bills taken from

the cash register at the Tahiti. One was a twenty to pay for the drinks."

"You paid?"

"No," Leo said. "Bobby Clarke."

"What did he buy with a fifty? Must've been food or "

Leo licked his lips. He looked away.

"Company, Leo?"

Leo nodded.

"Female?"

"Yes," Leo started to weep. He hung his head and sobbed hard. I waited for him to finish before I pressed him.

"Who did you pay?"

"I didn't pay anyone."

"Okay. Bobby paid. Who did Bobby pay?"

"Some older black man. Two young women came out. One blonde, one dark-haired. I didn't recognize the blonde until an older woman stormed in and took the blonde by the arm. They exchanged words. Not pleasant ones. Anyway, Bobby recognized the older woman. The three of them left for a while. A good while."

"What happened then?"

Leo shrugged. "The dark-haired girl and I went to our room at the Tahiti."

"You see Bobby later that night?"

Leo shook his head no.

"Who was the dark-haired girl?"

"She said her name was Bianca. She was a light-skinned black girl. She had green eyes, Dick. Very attractive. She wore the symbol of the fish on her necklace."

"Leo?"

"Yes?"

"Why didn't you tell me all this at the beginning?"

He sighed. "I was told not to," he said.

"By who?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you, Dick. They they control everything. You just don't understand. They "

"The people who control everything," I wanted to make sure who he was talking about.

"They told my wife, Dick," Leo started to sob. "They had pictures of me and all the women I'd been with. She left me, Dick. Jeanie left me all alone in that big house. I can't go there and be alone with my echo. That echo that echo has bad ideas and I don't want to hear those bad ideas, Dick. I live in a top-floor apartment over Cleveland's electronic store."

"By the all-night laundromat. That's convenient," I said.

"Yes. It is."

Leo sat in the middle of the floor, crossed his legs and wept some more.

I left Leo in the bathroom. I found Carole and told her Leo needed a doctor, but no one Reliant employed or knew. She knew one he used to see in Tulsa. She thought the doctor had moved to Odarko.

I went to the Whizz Comics office. Through the glass pane of the office door, I could see Alice talking to three other guys. She noticed me, opened the door, and said, "Dick, get in here. You got to hear this!" She pulled me inside.

The office was full of laughter and mirth. A very tall, distinguished gentleman with a thick mustache and dark glasses stood on one of the desks mimicking a surfer. A short, stout man in his fifties chomped on an unlit cigar, trying to ignore the man on his desk. He was drawing, his stubby hands working furiously. She introduced me. One man had long hair and thick brown glasses, his name was Roy. He was assistant editor. The man on the desk was Stan, he was the editor-in-chief and

wrote most of the stories along with Roy. The man trying to ignore Stan was Jack. He was the house artist, even though by now, the other artist didn't mimic Jack, nor Steve, who was the artist Alice replaced full-time.

Alice nudged me and told me not to stare at the lanky, long-haired man with the British accent talking to a larger bearded man in glasses.

"A Brit here in Odarko? That's a rarity."

"Hmmm good artist, slightly aggressive. Gregory Holland-Sampson and Roy don't get along very well. The man he's talking to is Big John Buller. He's taking over drawing Crom, that sword and sorcery book that's so popular now."

"He ever get aggressive with you?"

"No," Alice snickered. "We say hello, and drank coffee together once. Geez, you are too protective sometimes."

"Who is that guy," I pointed, and Alice immediately smacked my hand away. "Oww!"

"Cut it out, Dick. That's Steve Garrett over in the corner," she whispered. "He's insane! He wrote the talking Duck comic who has a friend that's a muck monster. I just got assigned to draw that comic."

"What the hell's a muck monster?" I asked.

Alice took me over to a large blow-up of a cover showing a wise-cracking duck running from the cops and a muck monster rising from the swamp scaring said cops.

"That's a muck monster," she pointed.

I looked closer at the credits on the cover. "Art by Alvin Hammond? I thought you drew that?"

"I did, silly!" Alice exclaimed and punched me in the arm playfully. "That's my pseudonym."

"Why aren't you using your real name?"

Alice shrugged. A forced, pained smile crossed her face. "It doesn't matter."

Garrett stood from his chair, coffee mug in hand. He wore coke bottle glasses. Does everyone in the comic business have glasses? He was very tall with a short receding hairline. He poured thick chunky coffee into the mug and said very solemnly:

"It is still a man's world out there, my son. Even more so here at Whizz Comics. The Star-spangled Crusader doesn't need the help of a girl, even though Margo the stunning blonde snoop often helps this U.S. government superhero out of a lot of jams." Garrett sipped his coffee, gasped at the awful taste, took another sip, and shrugged. "Women's lib is a dirty word in this office. I told her to fight to have her name in the credits. She's good, huh?"

"Damn good." I beamed.

Alice bit her lower lips, embarrassed.

"I don't care about credit. I want to be paid. No one is going to read this junk forty years from now."

"So you say, lil' missy!" Garrett faked hurt in his voice. "No, seriously. These guys are going to make tons of money in the next few years. A paperback deal for reprints is in the works with Bantam publishers and offers for TV shows."

TV? I thought. Anybody care about superheroes except for superman and batman? What a load of trash that kiddie show was.

"Alice," I began with a sigh. "C'mon. You created this art. You deserve to get proper credit."

"I'll talk to Stan again," she said.

The room erupted into loud laughter again.

"What's going on there?"

"Oh." Steve Garrett had a tug of a smile. He dismissed the scene with a wave of his hand. "Stan is having a story conference for *Space Glider*."

"This place is a regular zoo," I said.

Garrett laughed at that. "High emotions. Screams, tantrums, laughing, cursing, and sometimes kissing."

"Kissing?" Alice said shocked.

"Oh. You've never been to our Christmas party," Garrett said. "They don't call it the bullpen for nothing," he added dryly and walked away.

After we left Reliant offices, Alice and I went to her apartment and had lunch. We watched daytime TV and ate corn beef sandwiches. She turned on her black and white set and *Dick Van Dyke* was on. Rob dreamt everyone in his life didn't have an index finger. Alice laughed and laughed. I found it amusing but also annoying at times.

I Love Lucy came on next. Again, Alice laughed and laughed. The episode where Lucy's Cousin Ernie played by Tennessee Ernie Ford visits. I thought it was amusing and annoying. I think it was the audience mixed with the laugh track that annoys the shit out of me. As a kid, I loved *I Love Lucy*. My Mother and Father both tuned in to *Dick Van Dyke*. I didn't mind either show. Over the years I had grown more disillusioned with that oval-shaped monstrosity.

I was in a bookshop with Alice a few months ago and saw a book on display. *The Glass Teat* by Harlan Ellison. I bought that book and took it home. I read it in a couple of days between Thursday and Sunday. Mr. Ellison and I seem to share the same ideas about TV, modern society, and life itself. Although he is more prickly about most subjects, I, on the other hand, tend to let things glide by me.

Why not?

Nothing I can do about it. Sit back, enjoy life as much as I can and *The Twilight Zone* came on at noon.

I perked up. Alice was going to switch the channel to catch the Phil Donahue talk show. I touched her hand softly, smiled, and said "Can I watch this? I find them fascinating."

She smiled back and said, "Of course."

Alice left the couch while the episode began. I heard her in the kitchen doing dishes. Fifteen minutes later she went to her drawing table. I called out to her and asked if she wanted to watch this with me.

"No," she called back. "I have a deadline on this issue of *The Devil Knight*. Jesus, Stan and Roy come up with the most off-the-wall characters. You know, they want to do a comic book on this guy calling himself the Human Fly? He does stupid stunts and never takes off his mask in public." She mulled over this. "I think he does it for attention. He was more than likely a very lonely child."

Somehow, I was lost in the show and missed what she said after that.

The episode concerned a man who wakes up and his wife doesn't recognize him. Throughout the episode, no one knows him at his job or anywhere. The hackles on the back of my neck stood up. Tiny sweat beads fell from my head. My hands were trembling. I was just sitting there, immersed in the show. All voices from the TV would fade in and out.

I saw myself on the TV.

I was wandering around in a black-and-white landscape, dressed as the character from that episode, disheveled in a suit, my tie loosened. Houses on a backlot, trees, and a paved road created especially for the show, felt real and yet not real. I knocked on the door of a ranch-style house of nondescript color. The door opened and a woman attired in a 1950s Magnolia dress, pearl necklace, and heels. An apron was fashioned around her, her hair carefully placed in a bun.

The woman was Alice.

She looked at me incredulously, one hand on her hips.

"Can I help you?"

"Sure," I said, staggering up the small concrete steps to the screen door. "You can let me in."

Concern entered her voice as well as her eyes. "What—why would I let you in?"

I laughed. Swaying drunkenly.

"I'm your husband?" I countered her question.

"Mister," she said. "Either I'm crazy or you are," she stepped back and closed the front door just enough to leave it cracked. "But I don't know you!"

"What do you mean?" I screamed. By the time my drunken actions got me to the doorknob, Alice had slammed the door shut and managed to get it locked. "Let me in!" I pounded the door with my fists.

"Go away! You're crazy, mister!" Alice yelled back. "Go away or I'll call the cops!"

Behind me, the scenery began to fade and white snow fizzled in. Seconds later, the door disappeared, along with the house, and Alice's voice shifted to a distant analog echo.

"Call. Call. Call. Call."

I was back in Alice's apartment, sitting on her couch, watching a black and white TV show I didn't recognize. A woman dressed from the 1950s talking to a man in a wrinkled and torn suit, looking like he'd been beaten badly.

"Hey," Alice said and I snapped to. "You have a call. Didn't you hear me, Dick?"

"No," I muttered faintly. "I-I didn't." I stood slowly, wavered slightly.

"Are you okay?" Alice caught me by the elbow.

I steadied myself on her. "Yes I'm fine."

"Go lay down on my bed, Dick."

"No, Alice. I'm fine. Who's on the phone?"

"Shep," Alice said. "He said it was urgent."

She helped me to the phone in her bedroom. She held me for a minute longer, before I sat on the bed.

"Thank you," I said.

She nodded, glaring at me. Concern caused her voice to raise and become shaky. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm fine."

"Okay. Here." Alice handed me the receiver. "After you're done, I'm making you tomato soup, and you're going to drink it all. No argument. Call me if you need me."

I nodded, placing the receiver to my ears.

"Shep," I said.

"Dick, we have a problem," he said.

"Like what?"

"I got a call from Ralph. He's at the office of Alan Kohl's."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah " Shep let out a long sigh. "So I rode out there. It ain't pretty."

I stood slowly. "What do you mean, Shep?"

"We found Alan Kohl dead at his desk. More like on his desk. It ain't pretty, boy."

I WAS JUST ABOUT to get in the Javelin when two oversized gorillas in plaid suits grabbed me by the arms. They informed that I had another, more pressing engagement. I tried to shake them off and got walloped a few times. I think I can still taste my ribs.

For some reason these two bozos handcuffed my arms behind my back and put a pillowcase over my head. I only mention this because where they took me was to the Reliant offices. To beat me and whisk me away in a mysterious manner was asinine. I would've went willingly if I knew who I was seeing and where I was going.

Before I was unmasked I was ushered into the backway where they receive mail and deliveries. Pushed into an elevator, prodded down a flight of stairs, and thrown to a shag-carpeted floor. The pillowcase was removed and I saw four sets of very shiny, very expensive shoes. When my eyes adjusted, I saw Alan Holdsworth, Fredrich Thomas, Dieter French, and Dan Sternum.

These guys were the ones who really ran Reliant. Davis Goode, being not of sound mind for years, relied on them to run the conglomerate of five companies in four or five different areas of business. Five areas of business Odarko relied on as an industry.

"Take the handcuffs off," Holdsworth said.

One of the gorillas roughly removed them and I swore at him. He grabbed me by my shirt and forced me to my feet. I staggered and slammed into a desk. I realized my surroundings included several desks, and further realization, this was the secretarial pool. The much larger offices had glass windows with my captors' names painted on them.

I greeted them with a nod and a smile, not to mention attitude. "Mr. Holdsworth, Mr. Thomas, Mr. French, Mr. Sternum. Good to see you fellas again. Albeit, it's been a few years."

No greeting back, or a thank you for saving them from a crazed man strapped with dynamite. He was angry at Reliant for illegally taking his ranch to drill for oil. Now I wished I'd let him blow them up.

"You didn't have to kidnap me," I told the four stern, sour-looking men in five-hundred-dollar suits. "You could've called me in."

"Knowing your history," French said. "You do not follow orders very well."

"Not much choice when the people you work for are Nazis. Even getting the morning paper gets reported back to Reliant."

"There's no I in teamwork, Mr. Cole," Thomas said.

"I think I can correct you in my line of work, Mr. Thomas. You aren't on my team as far as grunt work."

"We're more like managers of this baseball club," Sternum said.

"Okay, okay. What the hell am I doing here? What do you want?" I said.

"Where is he?" Holdsworth spoke overtop of a very longwinded reply from French. French immediately shut up. Obviously Holdsworth was the number one at Reliant.

"Where is who, Mr. Holdsworth?" I asked.

"Davis Goode!" he screamed. "Where is that crazy son of a bitch?!" His face had become an unhealthy color of red.

"The hell do I know!" I screamed back.

"You last saw him less than a month ago," Thomas said. "Outside of Rockford County."

"When I picked him up I didn't know it was him. I didn't recognize him," I said. "What was he doing out there anyway?"

They stared at me. No words spoken until I prompted.

"C'mon! You have to give me a bone here," I said. "You want information, you have to give up some. Unspoken rule in business."

That was the lie I fed them. Again, they just stared at me a little bit longer. French broke the silence.

"He ran away," he said.

"Ran away to the circus?" I asked. "What is he ten years old? The man runs Odarko."

"I run Odarko," Holdsworth corrected me, waving his hands wildly, then quickly pointed a chubby, crooked finger in my direction. "Don't you ever forget it!"

The air was let out of the room. Only thing heard was breathing. I was generally frightened and taken off guard by this man as was everyone else. He exhibited psychotic behavior I had seen in the few mentally ill people I've run across in my line of work.

"No," I said, shakily. "I won't."

"You're going to tell us where Davis Goode is," Holdsworth snarled.

"Look, I told—"

He stepped forward and slapped me hard across the face. My first reaction was to strike him back. I lifted my shaky hand and the two gorillas both unsheathed their .45s. I swallowed hard, grit my teeth.

"I don't know where he is," I said.

He struck me again, causing a cut on my bottom lip. Blood dribbled down my chin. I wiped it away, glaring at him with two hot embers for eyes.

"I don't know where he is," I said again.

He tried to backhand me. I caught him by the wrists and bent it back. Holdsworth let out a screech. Immediately the two bodyguards had the barrels of their .45s at the temple of my head. I was okay with it if they wanted to shoot. I wanted to inflict pain on this old bastard even if it was my final act on Earth. I let go of his wrist and shoved him into the desk. He wallowed from side to side, knocking papers, pens and a typewriter to the floor.

The bodyguards were definitely going to pull the trigger when the other three board members bellowed a cease-and-desist order. Holdsworth, panting and obviously upset a lower human form touched him, strode quickly toward me with letter opener, ready to carve my heart out, no doubt. Dieter French stood between us.

Sternum cried out, "Enough of this silliness!" Holdsworth backed off, dropping the letter opener to the floor. He walked away in a huff. "The man said he doesn't know where Davis Goode is, let's forget it."

"We can't forget it!" Holdsworth screamed.

"No more of this foolishness," Thomas said with a wave. "I'm so sick of this whole ordeal the Object! All of it!"

"I am too," Sternum chimed in.

"We all are," French said.

Holdsworth gasped.

"Don't you ever say that not about the Object "

"Take him home," Thomas told the gorillas. "Leave him where he was."

They put away their weapons and grabbed me by the arm. I pulled away.

"No more of that!" Thomas said. "We wholeheartedly apologize for everything, Mr. Cole. I'll inform Leo to pay you a bonus for any inconvenience and stress this meeting has caused."

I walked to the door and opened it. The gorillas followed. I turned to four outdated businessmen, formally members of the human race and said:

“You can shove your bonus.”

AGAINST ALICE'S WISHES, I drove out to Alan Kohl's office. I parked next to Ralph and Shep's police cars. Ralph was manning a small crowd that had gathered, Shep was talking to a witness. A man in his seventies wearing a worker's jumpsuit. They were standing near the office door that laid on the sidewalk, mostly in pieces. A yellow tape was strung across the open threshold.

I went to Ralph first who kept yelling at three long-haired teenage boys.

"I see you trying to get to that office again, Gus, and I'm gonna break your spine!" He pointed to the tall one with an angular face and a sharp nose.

The smaller teenage boy, a little on the robust side, responded.

"That's police brutality, Deputy."

"So is me putting my foot in your mouth, Myers! Look I know your dad and I know they'd all three whop you boys for stealing that beer from Circle K the other day. I didn't charge you, but I sure as hell can tell your Dad's about it! Now git!"

"You can't shut the press out, Deputy!" The third boy said. The taller boy took hold of his friend's Neil Young T-shirt and dragged him along.

"Shush, Alex. We ain't real reporters. We just mess around with our newspaper."

"Having fun, Ralph?" I asked.

"Hell no," he retorted. "Tryin' to keep these fools from seeing that mess in there," he jerked a thumb toward the office.

"What happened?"

"The craziest thing I've ever seen in all my years as a lawman. Wait, Shep didn't fill you in?"

"He just said there was a dead body at Kohl's office."

"You better get the story from him, my friend," Ralph said. He saw one of the teenage boys try to sneak around the barriers and he took off in a sprint after the boy. "Come back here!" Ralph yelled.

I laughed, sauntering over toward Shep.

"Shep," I called out.

Shep waved and continued his talk to the elderly janitor. The old man looked grizzled. He'd lived several lifetimes. He spoke with a Polish accent and I could see by the numbers tattooed on his forearm he'd spent time in a concentration camp.

"Mr. Konster, this is Richard Cole." Shep nodded toward me and the old man eyed me nervously. "He's been working on a case in connection to all this. Can you repeat what you've told me for him?"

"Yes," Konster mumbled in broken English. "I was vacuuming the outer office. Mr. Kohl was in his office talking on the phone. He scream at me to shut my machine off. I do so."

"Was he in the habit of working late?" Shep asked.

"No," Konster said. "I don't usually see him. Uh, very strange he was there."

"You know who he was on the phone with?" I asked.

The old man shook his head.

"I start to clean the bathroom," he said, looking much traumatized. "The door came off."

"The door came off?" I repeated incredulously.

"Yes," Konster said. "Just uh ." He struggled to find the right word in English. "Boom! Come off uh broke in pieces."

"Mr. Konster said a big man came running inside," Shep interjected.

"A large black man," Mr. Konster wheezed out the last words after a brief pause. "But he forgive me I-I know this will sound uh crazy this large man he he his flesh was no more."

"Come again?" I asked, stunned by that statement.

"Uhhhh " Konster struggled to find the word in English, so he blurted out something in Polish.

I didn't know what the hell the old man said. I shrugged at Konster and shook my head at Shep.

"He said." Shep made a face in disbelief of what was coming out of his own mouth, "The perp is a dead man, Dick. A genuine corpse." Shep sighed and shook his head.

"The hell come on!" I laughed.

"No laugh, please. I am not crazy," Konster begged.

"I'm not saying you're crazy," I told the old man. "What you said sounds crazy."

"And how," Shep added. "Anyways, the perp busted in. Demolished the door," Shep nodded to the debris. "Stormed in and accosted Kohl. Accosted, hell! He tore him apart! The damndest thing."

Shep made a movement with his hand for me to follow him to Kohl's office, leaving Konster to think about the strange events. We stepped over the wooden pieces that lay on the sidewalk.

"At first, I was like you," Shep said. "I didn't believe that dribble. Two things changed my mind."

We entered the office and saw how desks were turned over, papers strode about, telephones and cords crisscrossed in weird alignment. The office was a mess. File cabinet drawers were open, tossed across the room. I could see inside Kohl's office through a cracked door, the body of a man lying on top of a desk. Shep pointed to the dirt scattered on the carpet. He crouched, took a handful between his fingers and smelled it.

"From a cemetery," he said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Has a distinct odor to it. The soil, I mean. Sulfur and other chemicals."

"So what's this supposed to prove, Shep? Huh? The walking dead burst in here, destroyed the office, obviously looking for something, and collapsed. What is this? *The Twilight Zone*? *Night Gallery*?"

"Might as well be," Shep chuckled. "This," he pointed to Kohl's office. "You see what's lying on top of that desk? Go on," he urged. "Go see who it is. Wait till you see the state of that body."

I paced myself and kept looking back at Shep. He kept pointing and saying, "Go on." I didn't want to see a dead body. The hair on my neck was already standing up. I pushed the door gingerly. It creaked as it slowly swung open.

Alan Kohl lay on that desk. A shocked and frightened expression on his face. His mouth was open like he wanted to scream. He'd experienced the same injuries, minus the bullet holes, Bobby Clarke had, except one noticeable one. Bruised face, forehead almost caved in. His neck was broken. The noticeable injury: his chest was torn open and his heart lay beside him.

Fitting for a heartless man.

I saw dirt on his clothes, the desk, and the carpet. Leading in, and leading out.

I heard Ralph's voice. "Sherriff," he said. "Meg has been trying to reach you."

Meg was their switchboard operator. I'd heard her voice on the radio every Saturday night reading Science fiction and horror stories with Alex Gold, a local DJ on a Jazz station. She had the sweetest voice I'd heard since my beautiful phone company operator.

"There's trouble at the Clarke home. Buke has called it in for help. Some guy burst in and is holding Bobby Clarke's wife hostage."

"Dick?" Shep called out.

"Yeah," I called back.

"We gotta ride out to Bobby Clarke's mansion," he said.

"Figures," I told him. "I'm coming too."

"I figured," Shep said.

FROM THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OCCULT
ARTIFACTS
BY RUSSEL DE'BLANC

(Copyright 1969)

THE OBJECT

Color: Black

5 x 5 x 12 inches

Weight: 7 ounces.

Made of Unknown material—sometimes described as made of granite, other times silk or unknown fabric.

THE OBJECT or as it is often referred to as The Obelisk was discovered in 1935 by Charles Shandt in Egypt during an exploration of the Tomb of Orasis, one of many of spellbinding Doctors that served King Tutankhamun, a pharaoh that ruled 1332-1323 BC. The Obelisk became Shandt's life long obsession to discover what this statue purpose. In his research, that took him all over the world, several of these statues would pop up in the strangest areas. Nigeria, Paris, Atlanta, Georgia, the Ukraine, Thailand.

Shandt wrote in his diaries that many people who found the statue had seen bright lights in the sky and the object fall to the ground. Upon touching the Obelisk, they immediately lose or discover time gaps, or

chronological events of their lives have no order, often repeating key moments several times before moving on. A priest in Paris told Shandt that would often find himself making tea for a young lady he eventually impregnated and resulted in his dismissal from the church. This young lady became his wife, but he kept re-living that moment where he made her tea and a meal, next finding himself caring for their toddler, and jumping back to the tea and meal, then to the point of seeing his wife bedridden, dying of cancer, back to the tea and meal, and forward to taking his son to school, back to the tea and meal, forward to his wife and he listening to their son act on a radio program.

Also, many people said the Obelisk was a living, breathing artifact. Witnessing the object's material expand and deflate as if it had lungs. Sometimes hearing heartbeats when all was quiet. Often hearing moaning, or crying of a weeping woman, who was seen roaming in the night, her wailing waking everyone, as was written by a farmer in Atlanta. Other times, those who have the statue in their possession, used the Obelisk as wish fulfillment. Such as the case in Thailand. A woman wished her mother to be alive. Walking through the village she saw a skeletal figure oozing flesh standing among crowds. This skeletal figure at first wasn't noticed by anyone, but often there was a complaint of foul odor, "something dead". Arriving home, the woman saw the skeletal figure sitting at the kitchen table, feeding the woman's new born child.

In the Ukraine, money was given to a man who lived on the streets. With the newly acquired profits he purchased a small cottage, some seeds and planted them. Instead of growing vegetables growing from his garden months later, body parts sprouted the plants. A week later, the man was arrested for the robbery and gruesome murder of the family who took him in when he arrived in that Ukrainian town.

As for Shandt himself, he committed suicide in 1961. In his suicide note, he wrote that a great spaceship had followed him wherever he

went, shining different colored lights on him, even revealing themselves to him, speaking in different languages, yet he understood everything they said. He asked to go with them to see the universe. They refused, telling Shandt: "You are needed on this world to deliver the statues."

The next day, Shandt set fire to his small lonely apartment. He had severe burns when he was taken to the hospital. A witness, a man dying of cancer roomed with Shandt, said a woman entered the hospital room. She sobbed uncontrollably as she slowly went to Shandt, placing a hand on his forehead. Shandt died that moment and the woman disappeared.

WE ARRIVED at Bobby Clarke's mansion. The heavy oak double doors were taken off the hinges and tossed in the bushes.

"The hell?" Shep said. He looked at me, shook his head. "He had to have a tool of some kind." The police officer inside him was doing the thinking.

I pointed at the chunk of wood missing from the door. "No, Shep. Stop thinking rational. Look at that door. Somebody put their fist through it!"

He nodded. "Then pulled it off the hinges." Shep's eyes jerked down to the steps. "Dirt," he said quietly. "Dirt under our feet, Dick."

I sighed. "Yeah. I see it."

"Are you thinking the same as I am? What's inside there?"

I swallowed hard. "I am, Shep," I said. "I am. But I'm not prepared."

He unsheathed his service revolver, a smith and Wesson .45.

"I'm not either."

We went inside, slowly, carefully. A trail of dirt led us past the foyer, the living room, the game room, and down a small flight of stairs into a recording studio. Music was playing. We heard a driving bass, pounding drums, and guitar fed through a wah-wah pedal with haunting male falsetto vocals peppered in the song. The man was

singing about money troubles, woman troubles, and a business deal that would seal his fate. The harmony lyrics repeated "Games People Play" and a male-spoken verse about an object, an obelisk that was going to change it all.

Shep and I entered cautiously, Shep with his gun drawn. He went in first, I followed nervously, lagging behind.

There he was, Bobby Clarke, already horribly decomposing, sat in a hard metal chair fiddling with buttons, dials, and levers on a recording console, the Obelisk prominently on the table by his boney elbows missing flesh. Behind him was a giant tape machine with more chords and wires connected to five speakers where the music was coming from.

Underneath the console, at Bobby's legs, was Irene Clarke huddled in a fetal position, attired in a white slip, her bare legs covered in bruises, weeping quietly. She had her face pinned to the floor, her fists smacking the hardwood floor. Her arms had the same purple bruises as her legs, and possibly cigarette burns on her shoulders and neck.

Bobby was trying to hum along with the song but his voice kept cracking and he had to stop and cough. He tapped his fingers in time with the drums. When the second chorus came in, his right hand pushed a red button and pulled a lever up, to create an echo of the voices. Bobby had no idea we were there. The song went into an extended guitar solo with a droning, constant organ backing it. Bobby finally noticed us. He didn't move an inch. He just glared at us with that one good eye, the other moved slightly in a large hollow cavity.

Shep and I glanced at each other. Neither of us knew what to do next.

Bobby reached over to a volume knob, turned it to the left and the music lowered. His white, brittle tongue moved inside the hole in his jaw. He spoke, though it was difficult for him. And when he spoke, the

eyeballs in the grey eye sockets rolled around slightly. His speech was slurred, muddled. His words were jarring.

"I found it," he said in fits and stops. "I found it "

Shep skirted around the console so this man undead man would not see him and strike out. Shep offered his hand to Irene. She whimpered and cowered. Realization of whose hand it was hit her hard. She wept as she wrapped a small delicate hand around Shep's large palm. His elongated fingers caressed hers and he hoisted her to a standing position after she managed to scoot from under Bobby's legs. He threw his arms around her and she buried her face in his chest.

They moved to the steps and Bobby slowly tilted his head toward them. He couldn't turn his head or neck before slumping down to the side. That was where he suffered wounds from being savagely beaten.

Shep helped Irene up those steps.

"Go somewhere safe," I heard him say. "Anywhere, as long as you are away from this house. Anyone else here?"

"Devon," she stammered. "Devon is dead. He's-he's in my bedroom dead. And and my dad he's." She swallowed back sobs, regained her composure, or as much of it she had in this sort of circumstance. "My dad is dead. He's in the kitchen. Dead."

"All right," Shep sighed. Slowly, with compassion, he said: "Now, you go and take care of yourself, darlin'. Don't stop for nothin' until you feel safe. Understand?"

I heard her say yes or some form of confirmation to his words. The pitter-patter of her bare feet trotted through the house was heard. Shep walked down the steps carefully, eyed Bobby and me. Bobby hadn't moved much. He was finally able to move his head back in my direction and the console. He stabbed the stop button, the music died instantly. He stabbed another play button on another area of the console.

A new song started up. Acoustic guitar, slide guitar with a wah-wah effect, and haunting vocals with echo dripping everywhere. Drums came in and a bass line that danced all over the track. I suddenly recognized the song from the lyrics.

"Long Gone Dead."

That Billy Crabb song.

I have to admit, as much as I liked Crabb's song, I really liked Bobby Clarke's version. It was dark, brooding, and moody. The guitars tripled were immaculate.

Shep came and stood beside me, gun nervously pointed at Bobby. Bobby gradually rocked back and forth to the music, his shoulders twitching slightly. Low gurgles came from his throat. Not once did we see any signs of breathing. To say the incident was surreal would be an understatement.

The Obelisk began to show life. A glowing hue appeared on the statue. The inanimate object bulged in the middle, then deflated. Bulged, deflated. Bulged, deflated. It did this in timing with Bobby's rocking.

"What do we do?" Shep asked.

I scoffed and said: "I don't know." There was a burning question I needed to ask him. "Bobby?"

He turned his head slightly toward me, eyes wandering in his sockets.

"What?" He gurgled.

"Do you know who killed you?"

His head bobbed twice.

"Who?"

"Hands with gold bracelet," he said. "I am seeking hands with gold bracelet."

"How did you get out of your grave?"

"I was summoned," Bobby said. "A voice a voice called me."

Shep showed signs of uncomfortableness. A man who was always at odds with a complacent knowledge that all is just and right, no monkey wrench can screw that up. There was this superstition gnawing at this complacency.

He cleared his throat. "Dick, come on." His shoulders slumped a bit and his gun hand eased up. "All of this is irrelevant right now."

"Is it, Shep? Wouldn't you like to know who murdered this man—" I motioned to Bobby with a nod. "What used to be Bobby Clarke?"

"No," Shep said. He sheathed his gun, held up his hands, pleadingly. "What I'd like is all this to just go away. Knowing who killed Mr. Clarke here won't make a bit of difference in years to come. Oh, people will remember him. They'll hopefully remember him for his music. Maybe some kindness he passed on to a deserved. I don't know. They'll remember the murder. Sure. They won't give a hoot who committed that murder. I guarantee. Humans are fickle. Most especially the categories they care about. Number one care?" He paused after posing the question. "Themselves, my friend."

We heard the sirens. Several cars roared up the drive. Voices shouted; a bullhorn sounded off instructing anyone and everyone to come out with their hands up. Shep and I glared at each other.

"Sometimes, Dick," he said. "You have to let things go."

That was an unusual statement for a man who once spent two years tracking down a con man who swindled elderly women living in Odarko.

I have to admit Shep was right. No matter the outcome of this case, I needed to find ways to let it go. I just need to know who that person with the gold bracelet was that killed Bobby Clarke. I said as much to Shep when the doors flew open and several Federal officers filed into the house. We heard shouting and demands. Trotting boots on the floors above us.

Bobby jumped from his chair and pushed Shep into me. We both fell hard on the concrete floor. He was on top of Shep and a barrage of gunfire lit up the basement. I screamed and rolled away from Shep and Bobby. I found a table near microphones and stands. I pulled them and the table over the top of me, hoping the flimsy metal could deflect any bullets that came my way.

I peered around the table and saw four heavily armed men with rifles firing at Bobby. I don't know how many bullets were fired, but several open holes littered his chest. He fell away from Shep, who had now rolled under the recording console. Bobby staggered, swayed, and caught his balance. They fired again. He staggered, swayed. Slowly, he stomped to the small steps where the men were and grasped the first one he saw by the throat. You could hear bones, ligaments, being crushed. Still holding the officer by the neck, Bobby tossed him in the air. There was a loud splunching sound as the man collided with the concrete wall.

He reached for the second officer and got him by his arm. The man pulled. He really shouldn't have. His arm came out of the socket completely. The man shrieked, falling on the steps. He fumbled to almost a standing position when Bobby took hold of his head and turned it three hundred and sixty degrees. The man's head popped off like a plastic doll's.

More officers came to the basement threshold and immediately retreated. Bobby climbed the steps quickly, charging after them. Shep and I stumbled through the rubble and trotted up those steps. We backed down quickly when a smoke bomb fell at Bobby's feet. We blocked our eyes and covered our mouths with a hand. Made no difference. The smoke got in our eyes and mouths. I felt Bobby plunge on top of me as he fell backwards, knocking me into Shep as we all three tumbled down those steps.

Having a dead body from a grave lying on you is bad, and must've been worse for Shep having two—one alive and one dead—not to mention the smoke making your eyes water and filling your lungs. Thank God Bobby rolled off me and I did the same for Shep as soon as I could. The smoke cleared. Bobby was kneeling. Shep was lying on his back wheezing, and I found a metal chair to sit on, coughing my lungs out.

Several more officers sprinted down to the basement, all of them screaming "freeze" or "hold it" at the same time. Bobby didn't move. They held their guns steady on him and two guys kept switching their aim between Shep and me. A tall man in a black blazer and white turtle neck pushed his way through the officers. It was FBI agent Kurt Humner. He stepped onto the last rung and scoffed.

"Yeah," he said dismissively. "I thought I'd find you here, Cole."

"Yeah," I said. "I knew you would show up."

He smirked. "You been at the county water supply lately?"

"You kidnapped anyone lately?" I was cold as ice. No smile, no frown. Serious as a fuckin' heart attack.

Shep glared at us, shifting his eyes slowly from one to the other.

"You two know each other?"

"We've run into each other a few times," I told him.

"I'm not here for you," Humner said.

"I know what you're here for." I nodded toward the Obelisk.

"And what that thing has created," Humner added.

I shook my head. "No, Humner. The Obelisk didn't create the undead Bobby Clarke. Another kind of magic is involved."

"Magic?" He smirked. "There's no such thing as magic."

"Just like there's no such thing as monsters?" I proposed.

"He is definitely a monstrosity." Humner turned his gaze to Bobby.

I walked up to Humner and touched his chest with a finger. "I wasn't referring to Bobby Clarke."

"Be careful what you say, Cole." His voice was leveled with malice. "No one person can avoid shadows."

"Yeah," I said. "I know all about shadows watching me."

Shep placed a hand on my shoulder. "Dick, I think it's best we head on out."

I nodded, turned to leave with Shep, and hesitated. I noticed the Obelisk was gone. I started to say something and Shep urged me to go to the steps. Something else prevented our exit. Bobby Clarke. He let out a loud moan.

The basement that had been filled with chatter became dead silent. Wide, frightened eyes roamed the room. Every cop, including Humner, went for the gun. Shep jumped and unsheathed his weapon. Bobby fell to the floor, convulsing, moaning, groaning, and weeping loudly. Sunken eyes grew wild and bulged to the point that red veins were like lines on a road map.

His arms flailed, his legs kicked, and a gaping mouth was suddenly, inexplicably, filled with mounds of salt. A black thread attached to a needle, appeared out of thin air and jabbed the top left corner of Bobby's lip, pulled hard and immediately entered his bottom lip, then up into the top lip again. This went on for several seconds until a complete zig zag had sewn his lips shut. Bobby stopped kicking. His arms lay at his sides, completely still. His body no longer convulsed. His eyes sunk into the back of his head creating dark chasms in the eye sockets.

Out of silence and sheer shock of the unbelievable event that unfolded in front of us, no one said or knew what to say, except Humner.

"What the hell?" Humner uttered.

Some knucklehead turned the TV on. Strange, mysterious music blared. People ran through some woods. On the screen flashed *NIGHT GALLERY*.

"Turn that shit off!" Hummer screamed. "We're freaked out enough as it is!"

I WENT BACK to my apartment after that. I sat in my chair, staring at the empty screen on the television. I sipped a beer I had retrieved from the refrigerator. All was quiet. Complete silence. Except a throbbing heartbeat. I searched with my eyes roving the living room to find the heartbeat. There. I found it. On top of the television, the Obelisk had appeared. Throbbing. Pulsating. The hard plastic expanding and deflating like the muscles of a human heart.

Something wasn't right.

I could feel it.

Something

Something wasn't right.

I sank into my chair and I became water running down into the floor. All of me running like a small river toward the television, entering the screen, soaked up by the leaded glass in the face panel. I felt the tiny white dots envelop me, caress me. The "white noise," as most people call it, carried me away from my apartment and into a chasm of darkness.

I found myself on the street of Robinson and Yandy, in front of the Owl diner. I was lying there in a fetal position, trying to generate some heat to ward off the night air. No traffic came through and no one was

out and about. I rose from the cold hard pavement and checked my wristwatch. It said twelve-thirty a.m. I could see inside the diner's large plated window that two or three customers were inside.

Bernice was filling a coffee cup of a man in a dark suit. He looked very familiar. He was short, good looking and spoke through his teeth. He had cropped hair in the style of the early 1960s and had a wiry smile. I realized who it was, only his name escapes me. I've seen him on television, introducing short filmed stories of the *Twilight Zone*.

I opened the door of the diner and stepped inside. The bell chimed and Bernice glanced at me, disapprovingly, a hand on her ample hips. The man turned and smiled at me. A woman and her young son had been playing with hot wheels police car. They glared at me.

"I told you before, you were not welcome in my diner," she said.

"Hold on," the man said. "That's who I'm waiting on."

Bernice gave both of us dirty looks. "Well, you both will have to have your meeting somewhere else."

"That's no way to treat customers," the man said jovially.

"I don't allow murderers in my place of business," Bernice said sternly.

"Bernice " The man took her hand in his. "I can call you Bernice, right?"

Bernice liked the attention, though she was caught off guard by it. She nodded to him.

The man continued: "First, Bernice, you have to be convicted of a crime in the eyes of the law to be labeled."

"I saw him," she gasped.

"Be that as it may, you have to say, there's two ways to skin a cat," he said, releasing her hand. Bernice gave him a confused look. The man smiled, shrugged. "I'm saying your point of view is not the only view."

Please, Bernice. Let him join me. Then, I'm sure Mr. Cole will be on his way."

After a few seconds of mulling it over, Bernice nodded.

The man waved me over. "Come on and join me at the table, Mr. Cole." He chuckled. "Bernice has graciously allowed me to enjoy your company."

Bernice cut her eyes at him, but she was more concerned my presence in her diner would drive customers away. The other few patrons didn't pay attention.

I wandered over, stood next to her. She glared at me, motioned for me to sit. I slipped into the booth opposite the man in a dark suit. He was overjoyed I accompanied. He slapped the table and chuckled.

"You want anything?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Bring him a cup of coffee," the man said, smiling hugely. "I should at least buy you a coffee for your troubles."

"One cup," Bernice said.

She sashayed to the counter, took an empty pewter cup with an owl plastered on it from a spinner rack. She returned and slammed it down in front of me. She was letting me know she didn't like me being there. She poured the dark brown liquid sloppily, creating a small puddle on the tabletop. She angrily mopped the coffee up with a towel from her apron. She finally went to the counter and sat down by the cash register, began reading the newspaper.

I sipped the black coffee slowly. "So, how do you know my name?"

The man shrugged. "I know everyone's name around here."

"I think this must be some sort of dream," I said.

"Everyone says that."

"Nothing makes sense anymore," I said.

The man nodded. "I feel, the less you try to make sense of life, the better off you are."

I scoffed. "You You are on television. You present stories that are at best, strange, sometimes doesn't make sense. You come out of the television. No rhyme. No reason. You would say just go with the flow."

The man smiled, sipped his coffee. "You think the best plan is offense. You never thought about defense."

"I don't " I shook my head. "I don't understand your analogy."

"Again," the man said. "Why waste time trying to understand things you will never understand."

All that has happened past few months, I wonder if I should be in Central State. As I thought that, I felt pain surge through my entire body.

I had a pained expression on my face. The man studied me.

"You fascinate me," he said.

"How is that?"

"You wonder if you should be in a looney bin."

"How do you know what I was thinking?"

"To be honest," the man said, "just like you, I don't think I can explain it to you any more than I can explain what's been happening."

"That's a cop-out," I told him.

"No," he said with all seriousness. "That's the truth. Something you will not face. Which, is why you are in the situation you are in."

"And the truth is?"

The man leaned in: "Richard Cole, you will not leave the past behind."

"The past won't leave me alone," I said.

"There's a choice," he said. "One step forward can make wings sail. Two steps behind, can sink a soul."

"I have to solve this " I said faintly.

"No," the man shook his head. "You don't. Just leave it behind, Mr. Cole. You are on repeat. Time to change the channel."

I looked up and I saw Emily walk by the diner. I rose from my chair slowly, watching her sail across the sidewalk in slow motion. She went toward the alley across the laundromat. I left the man at the booth, drinking his coffee. He knew I would chase after her. He knew I couldn't give up the ghost.

I knew I couldn't give up the ghost.

I HEARD the wailing and I followed it. Sobbing, weeping, and moaning. It was in my head and I couldn't get rid of it. The woman's weeping echoed throughout Odarko. No matter where I was, I could hear it. It grew louder when I was in Zachery.

I saw Emily. She turned to me, weeping and moaning.

The alley was not a dead end like it usually is.

The brick wall of the municipal buildings parted and disappeared just as Emily walked through them. I trotted after her, never seemingly to catch up to her. Where the alley led to was into a cul-de-sac that had about six houses staggered from each other. Her stride was neither quick, nor slow. But I was always twenty feet behind her.

She was wailing when I caught her by the arm. She turned to me, bloody tears ran down her cheeks, her eyes milky black, suddenly transformed into her normal brown.

"They're here," she moaned. "The sun and the moon and the stars brought them and they brought death to us death four letter word that is the same as love same power, same destruction. Hate. Love. Death. My body touched all three."

"I—" I was confused. I didn't know what to say. Except: "I'll find out who hurt you. Just go home."

Emily screamed, bent over as wailing burst from her lungs and assaulted the street like an array of missiles. She pulled away from me uttering: "Lies. Lies. Lies!!!!!!!!!!!"

She began to slowly levitate, her feet several inches from the concrete sidewalk. She floated away from me and dropped to the ground. She didn't rush as she sauntered away from me, yet I couldn't catch her even when I trotted behind her.

"Emily!" I called after her. She didn't look at me. She kept walking. "Emily!"

My voice carried in double echoes as an owl filled in the rest of the backing track. Other than the echoes, the night air made all sounds dead as a doornail that landed on my ears in a harsh thud.

The wailing, moaning and weeping never stopped.

Emily went through a walk with a cluster of bushes and a steeple with dead roses caressing the iron bars. She pushed the gate open with a hand. She took a cobblestone walk past a few dead trees bent over kissing high, sunstroked grass of a front lawn. She went to the front door of a two-story ranch house and strolled right in. No key was needed, no locks stopped her. She didn't even close the door.

I followed her inside.

Emily entered shadows and vanished. I called after her. I called out to whoever lived there. No answer. Emily was nowhere in sight. It was as if she'd vanished without a trace.

The wailing stopped.

Nothing but complete silence.

The place was a mess. Dishes everywhere. Dust on all the furniture. Trash bags and empty cartons of cigarette packs were all over the living room. Clothes were piled on the floor in mounds. Lamps were on, lightbulbs were blown in a chandelier light above, leaving just one casting a dim hue. The television was on, John Chancellor talking about

a plane crash in New York. I went into the study. Same mess, except a desk with a typewriter had papers neatly stacked.

A piece of paper was left in the typewriter. On the paper was this:

I saw the man get out of his '56 DeSoto. He finished a cigarette before opening the trunk of his car. He reached inside, tossed a few tools to the side and grabbed a potato sack. The man struggled to lift it at first. With a loud grunt, he threw the dirty sack over his shoulder and coughed. The fat, dumpy man with fizzy, short dark hair, entered the all-night laundromat, the limp in his left leg preventing him from reaching door in normal time.

I watched the man unload undergarments and shirts from the sack, place them in the washing machine. He poured powder in and closed the lid. He chucked a dime in the slot and turned the oversized black tumbler to the precise setting he desired. The washing machine started with a roar and jumped up and down before settling down to a constant murmur. The man looked in the sack, closed it quickly, and glanced around nervously.

He found a row of wooden chairs near a broom closet. Decided to sit. In his boredom, he took a copy of Newsweek and thumbed through it. Nothing caught the man's eye. He found a pencil, started to draw funny little people in the margins. One doodle was of a man being eaten by a hybrid dragon/tiger wearing sneakers.

A young couple ambled by the laundromat, stood by the door. The man looked up at them. He grabbed his sack from under the chair, wondered if that was who he was supposed to meet. I watched them from my car. I was in the middle of enjoying his cigarette, and zoning out with the ZZ Top's "Blue Jean Blues" fading out, and Sam Cooke fading in with "Bring It on Home."

The man and I waited for the couple's next move, which in retrospect was no reason to worry about. They crossed the street to the Owl, the only business besides the laundromat that was still open at midnight.

I couldn't wait any longer.

I got out of my car quickly, a black 1971 AMC Javelin. I walked across the street to the laundromat with no memory of my feet touching the street or sidewalk. I felt as if a giant wind had picked up and placed me at the doorway. I swung the door open and the man lifted his eyes from the magazine. Shocked, relieved, then realization that I was not who he was supposed to meet. Fear crossed his long face.

The man sprung to his feet. He took a step to the left, I was there. He took a step to the right, I was there. They locked eyes. Several moments passed.

I charged the man, grabbing him by his coat lapels. The man resisted, but for some reason he didn't fight back. I delivered three consecutive blows to the man's face, two struck his nose, breaking it. The man winced and moaned. I struck him three more times in the temple. The man broke into heavy sobs, tears merged with blood. He prayed, apologized to a Maryanne.

I felt nothing for the man. No empathy whatsoever.

The man was on his knees, begging incoherently. I still had him by his coat lapels. I dragged him to one of the washing machines. The man's begging was interrupted when I slammed his head into the washing machine. I could hear the man's scalp collapse. I wasn't satisfied. I drove the man's head into the washing machine again. That time, I heard liquid and saw flesh and bone turn to jelly.

I dropped the man on the floor, stood over him to see if he was moving. The man was dead.

"What the hell ?" I said.

"You like it?" I heard a voice say.

I looked up and saw an old man in a tattered brown sweater vest and red tie. He was stooped over slightly, but I could tell he had been tall at one time. His hairline was receding to the point his baldness from the middle led to the back of his well-groomed short haircut. He was smiling at me, or grimacing. I couldn't tell.

"How do you know about this?" I pointed to the typewriter.

The old man tapped the left side of his head. "All up here, my friend."

"You're saying you made this up?" I angrily jabbed the paper in the typewriter. "You made this up?"

He nodded. "Pretty good, if I say so myself."

I glanced around. A few books on the bookshelf caught my eye. I took a book from the shelf. The title was *Long Gone Dead*. The author was Jonathan Ross MacDonald. I turned the hardback over and saw a picture of the old man. The blurb said: P.I. Richard Cole is hired to track down a missing girl where it leads to the murder of soul singer Bobby Clarke.

I jerked my head and glared at him. I was dumbfounded. I felt frozen, trapped. I couldn't speak, move. I honestly didn't know what to say. But I kept thinking, am I real? Am a fictitious character.

MacDonald smiled hugely at me. "That's a good one." He pointed to the book. "You'll never guess the ending. Go ahead, take it. Hell, I'll even sign it for you." He took the book out of my hands, opened it up, and placed it on the desk. He took a Bic pen and scribbled on it:

To a new friend and reader—

Happy reading,
Jon Ross Macdonald.

He closed the book and handed it to me. Macdonald studied me. He looked concerned.

"Are you having a moment?"

"What?" I asked, snapping out of a daze.

"A moment. Are you all right?"

I nodded.

He chuckled. "Yes." He wagged a finger. "You are having a moment. That's what my daughter calls them. I uh seem to have a lot of those lately. Ever since my wife passed." Macdonald stopped to think about her. "I have trouble remembering what she looked like. Same as having trouble remembering why I am in the kitchen." He made a face as if something was painful. "The other day, Janis, my daughter, she found me wandering the grocery store calling for her. One of the times she went missing. Happened when she was ten. So she said. She says I do that quite often."

"Wander the grocery store?" I asked.

"Mmmm. Other places too," he said. "I can't keep track of time." His eyes roamed the room, met with mine. Quizzically, he asked: "Why are you here? Are you looking for somewhere to stay?"

"No, sir," I told him. "I'm looking for a girl. Her name is Emily. From what I understand, she was staying here with her boyfriend, Arthur. She's about nineteen. Brown hair. Arthur is a black male, where's glasses."

MacDonald shook his head slowly. "No. They don't ring a bell. There were quite a few people here. Overstaying their welcome. My daughter got rid of them. She cleaned the place up. But their ghosts came back and as you can see " He shook his head. "The state of my house would not qualify for a seal of good housekeeping, I'm afraid."

"Yeah," I said. "I see. Do you know Cody Carroll?"

"Yes!" MacDonald said joyously and clasped his hands exuberantly. "Cody is a fine young man. He was here with my business manager a few days ago. Ummm Klein no, that's not his name Cale "

"Kohl?"

"That's it! Yes. Great fella."

"What did they want?"

"Oh. They were looking for the Obelisk," Macdonald said.

I gasped. "They were?"

"Yes. Something wrong?"

"Why were they looking for it?"

MacDonald shrugged. "I haven't the faintest idea. As a matter of fact, I didn't know they knew it existed."

"But you did?" I asked.

"Of course," MacDonald said.

"Where did it come from? Did you buy it bring it from abroad?"

MacDonald chuckled. "No." He knew that was a stupid question. "The Obelisk just appears. No reason for its existence except as a tool for making all your wishes and dreams to come true. At least, from what I have read let me find the books I have on the subject of wish fulfillment there's a section on—"

I heard sobbing again as a jump-cut brought Emily back in view. She had her face in her hands, weeping. She was gone again, only to resurface and take two steps into shadows on the wall.

Minutes later, I saw Emily come out of the shadows. I was no longer interested in MacDonald. Or what he had to say about the Obelisk.

"Wait," Macdonald said. "I have more to say."

I didn't stick around. I saw Emily move through the house silently. I followed quietly. I didn't want to spook her and have to give chase again. She searched for something in each room, becoming increasingly

upset it wasn't found, whatever that was. She turned boxes upside down, dumping clothes and kitchenware. Each box contained something different. Books. Letters and envelopes. Like someone had moved in and never bothered to unpack.

From room to room, she opened drawers and dumped out the content. Moved a sofa and looked behind it. Searched through cabinets in a bathroom. Looked behind the toilet. In another bedroom, Emily pulled a mattress up. She laughed. She found what she was looking for. Whatever it was, was not visible to me.

She glided through the house again and past Macdonald typing on his old Underwood. I followed her and he perked up.

Macdonald smiled and said, "Oh! Hello. Who are you?"

"No one," I said.

"Oh," he looked confused. "I could have sworn I met you before." He shrugged. "You must be one of those ghosts I see quite often." With that, Macdonald went on typing.

Emily went through the backdoor, leaving it wide open. I was right on her heels and I grabbed her by the arm and jerked her toward me.

"Okay, Emily," I screamed. "I'm sick of these games!"

It wasn't Emily facing me.

It was Alice.

FROM THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OCCULT
ARTIFACTS
BY RUSSEL DE'BLANC

(Copyright 1969)

THE OBJECT

Color: Black

5 x 5 x 12 inches

Weight: 7 ounces.

Made of Unknown material—sometimes described as made of granite, other times silk or unknown fabric.

THE OBJECT, often referred to as the Obelisk, was discovered in 1935 by Charles Shandt in Egypt during an exploration of the Tomb of Orasis, one of many of spellbinding Doctors that served King Tutankhamun, a pharaoh that ruled 1332-1323 BC. Discovering the purpose of the Obelisk became Shandt's lifelong obsession. In his research that took him all over the world, several of these statues would pop up in the strangest areas: Nigeria, Paris, Atlanta, Georgia, Ukraine, and Thailand.

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to him, speaking in different languages, yet he understood everything they said. He asked to go with them to see the universe. They refused, telling Shandt: "You are needed on this world to deliver the statues."

Shandt threw himself from a bridge the next day and drown in icy water.

THE ROOM WAS tiny and dark.

I heard the clicking sounds of heeled shoes in the hallway outside my room. The echoes were louder and the clicks were many and of varied paces. Chatter with low and high voices, men and women. All those voices penetrated my aching brain. It drove me nuts.

As I said, my room was dark except a sliver of light from the hallway found its way under my door and cast one long column my face and the wall I leaned against. The cot I sat on was hard as nails with wires poking through the thin mattress. At least they took the funny vest off of me. My arms were no longer restrained.

The door opened and lights came on, blinding me. Two orderlies appeared, stone-faced, arms crossed, to let me know how tough they were. Loud clicking of high heels sounded off and the two men stepped aside to let a short blonde-haired woman carrying a notebook through. She raced up to me with long strides, her eyes focused on me the entire time. One of the orderlies pushed a metal fold-up chair across the floor, opened it up and she sat quickly, crossing her legs.

I recognized her as Cindy, the doctor Ajax had been seeing. She fixed me up after I had been hurt at the riot in Zachery. I'd also seen

her and her husband in the elevator at Reliant offices, bickering with each other.

"You know why you're here and you know who I am?" she asked.

"No," I whispered.

"Come now, Mr. Cole. Let's not play games."

"Yes," I told her. "Let's not. I've been in this dark room for days. No reason. I must've been taken and placed here not of my own free will."

She cackled.

"You think it's only been a few days?"

I nodded.

"Try six months," she said.

I scoffed. "Naw. You're putting me on," I said. "Look, Doctor—"

"Doctor Roberts," she said. "Doctor Cindy Roberts."

"Doctor Roberts. Why am I here?"

"You don't remember?"

"Obviously I don't." I became agitated. "If I remembered or knew, then I wouldn't ask."

"All right," she said. "I'll play this game." Doctor Roberts sniffed.

At that point, a tall, slim man in large-framed glasses entered the room. He stood behind Doctor Roberts, his hands grasping the back of the chair.

"My husband." She pointed over her shoulder with a pen. "Doctor Jerry Roberts."

"Okay, okay," I said. "So what! Get on with it, lady!"

The orderlies were concerned that I raised my voice or peppered my words with anger. They stepped up and Doctor Jerry shoed them back to their corners.

He turned quickly, kept his steady on me. "You came here for alcohol treatment. At least that's the cover story invented by your bosses."

"What the hell are you talking about," I laughed. "What bosses?"

"Come now, Mr. Cole," Doctor Cindy said. "You take us for fools?"

"I don't have a drinking problem—"

"Yes," Doctor Jerry interjected. "You do, Mr. Cole. But that's not why you are here. You are here for the Obelisk."

I laughed nervously. "A what? I don't even know—"

Doctor Cindy held up a finger. One of the orderlies stepped forward and struck me across the face with an open hand.

"If you tell us the truth, Mr. Cole," Doctor Jerry said. "You leave here physically unharmed."

"Physically?" I asked sardonically.

"For the amount of time you've been a guest here," Doctor Jerry paused, placing a finger on his lips, and chose his words wisely, "you've been a huge help to science."

"And your country." I heard Humner's voice from the threshold. Humner walked in with a quickened pace, slamming the door shut. "You've been a huge help to America and all Americans, Cole."

"You get around, Humner," I said.

He scoffed. "You have no idea, buddy."

I felt panic build inside me. I bit my lower lip to stop my stammering. I even pinched my wrists. Nothing helped.

"Y-y-you—You people should be the ones locked—locked—locked up in these—these—these—rubber rooms. You're all—crazy—crazy as shit."

"Well," Doctor Cindy said. "Regardless, we are giving you another chance to come clean and tell us where the Obelisk is."

"Why is that—that-that—thing so pop-pop-popular with you people? It's—it's— a hunk of junk!" I screamed.

Uneasy looks were exchanged.

Doctor Cindy rose from the metal chair and an orderly rushed over and folded it under his arms.

"I think we're done here," she said.

"Mmm, yes," Doctor Jerry concurred.

She and her husband turned to Humner. Doctor Cindy placed her hand on Jerry's arm, rested her head on his shoulders.

Doctor Jerry continued: "I'm afraid this particular subject will cooperate the usual way. Our ethics prevent us from carrying out any further actions, Mr. Humner."

"You are officially turning this case study over to me?" Humner said.

"Yes," Doctor Cindy said. "You are officially in charge, Mr. Humner."

"However " Doctor Jerry smiled at his wife. She beamed back at him. "Seeing as the clinic is in dire need of funds to continue our work, we could, say, accept a great financial reward on behalf of the United States government?"

A twinge of a smile gradually emerged on Humner's face. "A grant. I believe that is what you are referring to. A grant you wrote us last year and us, being the government, sent the check, yet misplaced the document?"

"That is a very accurate account of the situation, Mr. Humner," Doctor Cindy said.

"You may continue your work in the case study of Richard Cole." Humner glared at me. Doctor Cindy and Jerry followed his eyes to me. "For a substantial fee for cost and effect, we can also pay you good doctors for your work going forward. No need to keep any details. I'll have my secretary call you for your socials and as of this moment you are employees of the United States federal government."

I WAS FORCED to watch multiple films of Nazi propaganda and Hitler walking along hills of green and flowers. Blue skies and mountains towering above. Hitler looking glumly at all that was around him. Little yellow-haired girls in white dresses handing him marigolds. His fiery speeches intercut with U.S. and Russian air raids. British soldiers marching in German towns, past desperate villagers.

Two days later, they made me watch a black-and-white film of a woman. Just like me, she was tied to a chair. The raven-haired beauty was completely naked, her wrists and ankles bound to a wooden chair. Her legs were also tied by leather belts, made to be wide open, so the audience can see her vagina. If you are thinking this was sexy, by no means was it. Her white skin was stained and had dirt caked all over. Her unruly hair was in knots. Her face looked to have been bruised, but I really couldn't tell because of the dirt. Her lower area had not been groomed and the wild pubic hairs seemed to curl and invade her inner thighs. Her bright red lips were moist, but I don't think it was her choice.

She was not turned on.

She was scared to death.

She kept asking, "Why are you doing this to me?"

A garbled voice, spoken through a running fan, responded with a laugh: "Because we can."

"Please," the woman begged, sobbing. "I'll do anything. Anything you want. Let me go to the bathroom."

"No," said the mysterious voice said.

And she couldn't hold it any longer. Piss ran down her legs and the chair, formed a puddle under her feet.

I was so angry I cried out I was going to kill everyone in the building. All the doctors. All the nurses. All the orderlies. I named Doctor Jerry and Doctor Cindy as my first victims. I named Humner, gave a very detailed account of how I was going beat him to death with a claw hammer and leave his broken, battered body out by the desolate highway so vultures could devour his heart and black soul.

FROM THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OCCULT
ARTIFACTS
BY RUSSEL DE'BLANC

(Copyright 1969)

THE OBJECT (or Obelisk)

Color: Black

5 x 5 x 12 inches

Weight: 7 ounces.

Made of Unknown material—sometimes described as made of granite, other times silk or unknown fabric.

THE OBJECT or as it is often referred to as The Obelisk was discovered in 1935 by Charles Shandt in Egypt during an exploration of the Tomb of Orasis, one of many of spellbinding Doctors that served King Tutankhamun, a pharaoh that ruled 1332-1323 BC. The Obelisk became Shandt's life long obsession to discover what this statue purpose. In his research, that took him all over the world, several of these statues would pop up in the strangest areas. Nigeria, Paris, Atlanta, Georgia, the Ukraine, Thailand.

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The Wailing Woman herself can be a bringer of doom, death and destruction, unless you are able decipher what is troubling her. Most

likely she speaks in code or jumbled sentences. If a person can detect the source of her problem and offer any solution, the weeping and moaning stops, and she disappears or moves on to her next victims.

As for Shandt himself, he committed suicide in 1961. In his suicide note, he wrote that a great spaceship had followed him wherever he went, shining different colored lights on him, even revealing themselves to him, speaking in different languages, yet he understood everything they said. He asked to go with them to see the universe. They refused, telling Shandt: "You are needed on this world to deliver the statues."

LEO CAME to see me a few months before. We were sitting in the visitor's center a ways in the back of the room, off from other patients. I went in the hospital delirious from drinking too much and ready to leave with a lust for life. Renewed, so to speak. Alice was sitting in the front row, next to the piano, reading a copy of *Dune*. She would smile, move her eyes away from the book periodically and bat those bedroom eyes at me.

"How are you getting on, old boy?" Leo asked.

"I met somebody," I told him. "She's an artist."

He looked at me incredulously.

"I see," was all he said. "How did you meet them?"

"Her name is Alice," I beamed. "We met at AA meetings."

Leo nodded. "Well." He chuckled. "That's wonderful, Dick."

"What's wrong, Leo?"

"What? Oh, nothing. Nothing is wrong."

"Leo. Something is wrong."

"How do you know?"

"The look on your face."

Leo shrugged, sighed. "Yes." He patted me on the knee. "We've worked together so long that we know each other's ticks."

"Yeah." I nodded. "I suppose so. Spill it, Leo. What's wrong?"

"I didn't intend to come here and disturb your rest. However," Leo paused, "we may as well discuss a certain problem."

"Like what? Come, damn it. I hate it when you beat around the bush."

"We've been robbed," Leo blurted out.

"Robbed? Your house? Car? What?" I said impatiently.

"The office."

"Office?"

"Good God, must I spell it out?"

"Yeah!" I chuckled. "Shit. You're half way there, boy!" I threw my hands into the air.

One of the orderlies glared at me angrily. I smiled at him, shook my head to convince him we were not arguing and there was no trouble.

He hesitated, swallowed hard.

"The Obelisk."

"So, what do you want me to do about it? I'm in here." I was agitated beyond belief. "Get one of your two-bit detectives to find it."

"I would, believe me, Dick, I would." Leo paused, gave me a pained look. "The company asked for you."

"Tell 'em to go fuck themselves," I said. "They are the reason I started drinking heavy. Too much work. No time for others. Now that I've found Alice." I stopped talking. My eyes found Alice smiling at me. "When I get out of here, I'm tendering my resignation."

Leo was shocked. "Dick, no. Please. I rely on you."

"Maybe it's time you don't rely on me, Leo."

I WOKE up with water dripping over my head.

I was in total darkness. I could feel fabric covering my eyes. I felt hot breath on my face. I heard the questions thrown at me like rock gut punches. I don't answer.

I heard Doctor Cindy and Doctor Jerry taking turns assaulting me with questions about the Obelisk. Doctor Cindy was nasty, aggressive. Doctor Jerry was passive. Promising I could leave as soon as I told them where it was.

I took it all in.

So what?

I can take it.

That's what I thought.

After hours of being drenched, I begged for them to stop.

They didn't.

They said they would stop if I told them what they wanted.

I did.

God forgive me.

THE DOOR CREAKED OPEN. A shadowy person entered, turned the lights on. I was a shell of my former self. I sat on my wet bed, huddled against the wall. The shadowy person revealed himself to be Humner. He closed the door behind him, turned to me and grimaced. I imagine he thought he was smiling. He walked to me, and I hugged the wall closer, hoping he wouldn't hurt me anymore.

"Relax," he said. "You can see I'm by myself."

I didn't relax. I just wanted this nightmare over.

He sat beside me, shoved a key in my direction.

"You know what that is?"

I nodded slowly.

Humner laughed.

"No, you don't." He scooped it up with a hand, waved it in my face playfully. "What is this? Huh? What is this?"

"A key," I whispered.

"No." He laughed. Oh, how I hate that laugh. A mean, hateful laugh. "This is your freedom."

I glanced at him, then at the key. I reached for it. He moved his hand away, still grasping the key.

"Uh-uh," Humner said. "First you have to do some things for me." He saw the terrified look on my face. He shook as his throat cut loose that awful squealing laugh. "Don't be afraid, Cole. C'mon, get up."

I shook my head.

"I don't want to," I told him.

"You don't have a choice."

"I want to stay here," I babbled. "I like it here. I love it here. I never want to leave —"

Humner grabbed by the arm and pulled me to my feet. I gasped and wailed. He punched me in the gut and I fell to floor. I laid there, crumpled up, wept like a baby. He grabbed me by my hair and pulled me to a standing position.

"Get up!" Humner screamed. He pushed me to the door and stumbled, braced myself with a hand on the wall. "We're taking a ride, asshole!"

Tears streaming down my cheeks, I made my rubbery legs get into a fighter's stance, balled up my fists.

Humner shook his head. "I'm not going to fight you. You will do as I say. If you don't," he grinned, baring teeth. "That nice slut down the hall, yeah, her, Alice? I'm going to kill her."

I relaxed my arms. I knew it was over. I was beaten.

"Okay." Humner laughed. "Let's take that fucking ride."

HUMNER DROVE me out to the dam, ten miles from the hospital. We stood over the concrete wall watching the wild, flowing water being pumped into Odarko and several other surrounding counties' water tanks. The moon was bright and full and was our main source of light besides one flood light from the Odarko main house. He had a paper bag in his hands. Where that came from, I have no idea. Maybe it was under seat of the car. He was watching the currents intently, a snarl on his face.

"What are we doing here?" I asked after a prolonged silence.

"Serving God and country," Humner murmured.

"What the hell does that even mean, Humner?" He didn't answer, so I pushed. "Come on! I don't understand any of this!"

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter."

Humner reached into his jacket pocket and took out a vial of clear liquid. He studied it, then handed it to me. I held it up in the moonlight.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Don't worry about what it is. Just dump it into the dam. Do it for God, the flag, and country."

I shook my head.

"No," I said. "I'm not doing that. I know what it is. Lysergic acid diethylamide. LSD. I'm not going to poison Odarko."

"You aren't poisoning anyone!" Humner screamed. "You are helping conduct a vital experiment!"

"Uh-huh," I hand it back to him. "You do it if it's so fucking important."

Humner unsheathed his weapon, a .357 magnum. The damn thing was bigger than his head. He pointed it at me and sneered.

"Do it," he said calmly, offering the vial back. "Pour the liquid into the dam."

"No," I said.

"I'm going to shoot you in the face."

"Okay," I told him. "Do it."

Humner brought both hands and gun to the face, stamped his feet in a childish fit. A high-pitched whine gave way to an ear-piercing scream. When he was done with the tantrum he thrust his gun hand and .357 toward me.

"You don't understand," he lamented, sobbing. "This," he waved a hand in circular motion indicating everything around us, "you don't control it. I don't control it." He pointed the gun skyward for a second and then aimed it back at me. "They! They control it! And they they want to know what makes us tick!"

"Who who are they?"

"You know who they are. My God you work for them."

"Reliant?"

"Yeaah-huhhhhhhhh!" Humner said in an excited retarded voice to implicate that I was the imbecile. "Jesus, you don't know what they are —" He chuckled. "Oh no. oh no. You don't know what they are into? The Obelisk and all?"

“Look, I was asked by Leo to look into the killing of Bobby Clarke —”

“So? Who cares about a dead black entertainer? No one, Cole. That was a ruse, a—uh, what does Hitchcock call it?—a McGuffin! Smoke and mirrors for you to find the Obelisk. You did.”

“By accident,” I said.

“Yeah, right. Leo had the Obelisk the whole time. He was selling it to Bobby, for his own profit and gain. He lost it when Clarke took it with him when he left with that girl.”

“You set that up.” I pointed a finger at him.

“No,” he said. “Reliant did.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “I’m through with all of this.”

“So you think. Your hands are all over the dead bodies. And the future ones. Okay. Don’t give Odarko the experiment. The higher ones in the sky don’t care. I’ll do it! And then I’ll kill you and that bitch of a girlfriend of yours!”

I ran toward him and the gun went off twice. I felt two bullets enter my chest and exit my back. Momentum pushed me into Humner and the vial left his hand. He fell on the hard pavement; the gun fell to the concrete and slid away from us. I heard the splash. The vial and the contents, the mind-expanding drug in liquid form was in the water, floating down in a rapid stream.

I smiled. He didn’t open it. He didn’t open the vial—

I saw the lid lying beside him.

He did it.

Humner poisoned the minds of everyone in Odarko.

For God and country.

Everything was going dim. The pain was immense. I could feel the coldness of the pavement on my body. Just as darkness enveloped me, bright, shining lights engulfed Humner and me. A loud humming

invaded my ears and before long I couldn't hear anything else. Including Hummer's scream.

I forced my eyes to focus on what was hovering above us. A metal oval-shaped apparatus with multi-colored lights flashing. A metallic voice cut in on the humming. No audible dialogue could be understood. I swear to God it was like something out of a 1950s science fiction movie.

"I'm-I'm sorry," I heard Humner say.

The metallic voice boomed again.

"Please," Humner sobbed. "Don't do this I've been a good boy I've been a gooooooooood boy!!!!"

And a spectrum of blue lights shot out of the metallic ship? This wave of blue lights shone on Humner; he was frozen for minute seconds, then vanished.

Gone.

Humner was gone.

The ship too.

I pulled myself up, using the concrete wall of the dam. I was losing a lot of blood. I staggered, took a few steps, and fell over the wall, into the rapid stream of water.

The last thing I remember was the sound of a telephone ringing.

I WAS BLEEDING BADLY from the gunshots, leaving a trail of blood as I staggered around.

I stumbled onto an empty street, and I have no idea how I got there. I heard the droning sound and saw flashing lights in the distance. I had a paper bag in my hands. I stopped to look inside. The Obelisk was inside.

I looked up, and saw the flashing lights coming loser.

They were after me.

They wanted the Obelisk.

I saw a payphone. The receiver was hanging by the cord, just dangling in the street light. I ambled over and heard a voice echoing from the other end. I knew that voice. It was my own.

"Hello," he said. "Hello?"

"Is this Dick Cole?"

"Hello?"

"Is—"

"Hello?"

"—this—"

"Hello?!"

"Dick Cole!"

"Hellooooooooo!!!!!!"

The voice screeched.

"Hello!!!!!!"

The voice repeated.

A strange chirping sound came over the droning telephone line. Then a voice popped on so loud, I dropped the phone, winced at the discomfort the voice had on my still sleeping ears. Although muffled, I could tell the grizzly voice belonged to a man that was possibly middle aged, smoked too much, drank a lot of whiskey, and more than likely white. I retrieved the receiver, slowly pressed his to one end, and his mouth to the other.

"Hell-oooooooo!!!!"

"Is this Richard Cole?"

A short pause.

"Sometimes," he said.

"What?!" I said.

"What?" he said.

"What?" I asked.

"What are we talking about?" the man on the other line said.

"Are you Richard Cole?!"

"I am," he said. "Why don't you form your questions in complete sentences so I can understand what you're talking about?"

I waited to speak again. My mouth was dry my lips was sticking together. I felt woozy, grabbed the metal box the phone was connected to. The pain in my chest was immense. I leaned against the payphone to keep from falling down.

"They did it," I said after a moment.

"That's wonderful." I sat on the side of the bed, ran a hand across his balding head. "I appreciate the update. Good night."

"Wait, wait," I begged. "I'm trying to tell you something."

"Okay, make it quick. If I don't get my eight hours my face gets wrinkled and the beauty cream clogs my arteries."

"Please," I went from confidently gruff to dismal whine. "Don't make light of these things. This is this so horrible."

"Look, you didn't even say who you are and who is doing these horrible things."

I started breathing hard. The pain in my chest was worse. I willed myself to stay upright. I cleared my throat. The flashing lights had gotten closer, but for some reason they stalled about 100 yards from me, the ship was hovering.

"I can't go into too many details. They're on to me I'm sorry. I just need to ask you to help me. Stop these people from doing anything else—if I warn you ahead of time—"

"Look, buddy! It's way too late for games—"

White noise took over and I couldn't hear the rest of what was said.

"I'm not playing games—" I was screaming over the white noise. "I have to warn you—"

The static cleared up and the man's voice faded back in. I was yelling over his voice.

"This phone call is a prank or joke and I don't think this is funny—"

"—I am YOU! I am Richard Cole! I have to warn you! Do you understand?"

Silence.

"I think so," he said. "Look. I can't help you if you don't tell me who you are, what you need me to do, and who these people are."

In a huff, I said, "I just told you everything!"

"Hey, buddy, there was a lot of damn static on the line and I didn't understand—"

Click.

The line went dead. Static took over completely. I let go of the receiver and slid down to a crouching position, sat gingerly on the ground. The cord dangled in my face. Blood oozed out of my chest a rapid succession. I placed a hand over the gunshots to stop the bleeding, realized that was futile, and accepted the fact that I was dying. The ship hovered above me. The Flashing lights from the metal oval brought down a multi-colored spotlight on the phone and me, hurt my eyes. I looked away. Just then I saw a shadow looming tall, towering over me. It shrank down to human size. The gray-black shape flittered long zig zags across the face and body, shifting into human form. I caught a glimpse of who it was.

Scratch Williams.

He reached over, took the Obelisk from my hand. Then he hung up the phone. The multi-colored spotlight moved from me onto him, engulfed his stiff, still body, pulled him up into the night sky. He faded into the flashing lights as they dissolved. The clicking stopped. The white noise ceased. The ship zipped out of view.

Darkness came to me, and I was no more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark Slade is the author of *Yardbird*, Book One in the Odarko series; *A Witch for Hire*; and the Barry London series. He is co-editor of *Twisted Pulp Magazine*. Co-author of future non-fiction books *Conversations with Joe Lansdale* and *The Marvelous Bronze Age-Conversations with Marvel Comics Creators*. He lives in Williamsburg, Virginia, with his wife and daughter and a Chihuahua named Chachi.

To learn more about Mark Slade, visit his [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).